

Dionysus in the Dungeon: The Nietzschean Duality in David Ives' *Venus in Fur*

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ABSTRACT: Since *The Birth of Tragedy*, Friedrich Nietzsche's theories have completely changed the landscape of theatre analysis. Even as tragedy as a genre has declined in popularity in recent years, his writings on tragedy remain relevant. The framework of *The Birth of Tragedy* has been used to reevaluate many different works, from the Greek classics to cartoons. I will explore how the Apollonian and Dionysian duality manifests in contemporary theatre, using David Ives' *Venus in Fur* as an example of effective use of this duality, while also examining the ways in which relying on it can stunt character development in the writing process.

Since *The Birth of Tragedy*, Friedrich Nietzsche's theories have completely changed the landscape of theatre analysis, providing an alternative to the analysis of Aristotle's *Poetics* that is, unlike the works of the Neoclassicist writers a few centuries before, rooted in a deep understanding of what Greek theatre was and what it was attempting to do. Instead of focusing on plot or the Unities, Nietzsche writes that Greek theatre is composed of two major forces that, when they co-exist, encompass the full spectrum of human emotion. The Apollonian and the Dionysian, as he conceived them, are opposing forces that eternally rail against the other, and yet they are mutually dependent in order to reach their full potential. The Apollonian, named for the Greek deity of painting and sculpture, is associated with "light, dream (...) rational knowledge and moderation" (Wilhelm 2000). The Dionysian is in many ways the inverse. Dionysus is the god of intoxication and music, which is Nietzsche attributes with "formless flux, mysticism, and excess" (Wilhelm 2000). Both are needed to create tragedy, Nietzsche says, and the entirety of Greek theatre can be distilled into these two characteristics. His writings on tragedy remain relevant, even as tragedy as a genre has declined in popularity in recent years. The framework of *The Birth of Tragedy* has been used to reevaluate many different works, from the Greek classics to *SpongeBob SquarePants*. Through this essay, I hope to explore how the Apollonian and Dionysian duality manifests in contemporary theatre, using David Ives' *Venus in Fur* as an example of an effective use of this duality, while also examining the ways in which leaning too far into these characteristics can have a negative effect on character development.

While the classics will always be remounted and reimagined, the amount of new theatre that counts as a pure tragedy (not a tragicomedy, not a drama), is dwindling. This change in trends happened for a myriad of reasons, but as tragedies decline in popularity, theatre scholars have increasingly turned to applying Nietzsche's ideas to plays that aren't tragedies, and they argue that a play doesn't have to be a tragedy in order to have some of the features described in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

The Apollonian and Dionysian forces he writes about are no doubt ubiquitous within tragedy, but can they appear in plays that don't fit the tragic genre? Nietzsche's writing, which was exclusively explaining classical Greek tragedy, makes constant reference

to the chorus of a tragedy (which he argues is the Dionysian element of theatre), which most plays today, even tragedies, lack. In Greek theatre, a chorus is a group of actors that narrate the events of the story and act as audience surrogates, often using music and dance to embody how the community feels about the events of the play. By the parameters set out in *The Birth of Tragedy*, the chorus is what makes a tragedy, and is at the heart of classic drama. As tragedy has evolved, the chorus has become less prevalent (that is not to say that more recent tragedies do not have any elements that could be understood as a chorus), but much of Nietzsche's writing remains relevant even in the absence of the chorus.

As theatre has moved away from tragedy as a prominent genre, we can begin to see the prevalence of elements of Nietzsche's theatre analysis in genres other than tragedy. While Nietzsche himself asserts that the Apollonian and Dionysian forces can only be a part of tragedy as a function of the genre, many have written extensively about applying the concept to other genres and forms of media, from *A Chorus Line* (Dunbar 2010) to *SpongeBob SquarePants* (Wynn 2021). In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche asserted that the Apollonian/Dionysian polarity embodies the full spectrum of human emotion and experience, and though characters that fit in these categories are still represented today, the aim is not usually to capture the complete range of human emotion as it was in the Greek era. Instead, the Apollonian and Dionysian are often written as two diametrically opposed character types that are eternally at odds with each other. While they are not stock characters in the same way the Commedia dell'arte characters are, they have become a sort of archetype that are recognizable and come with a built-in conflict: the Apollonian character is dedicated, rational, and harmonious, where the Dionysian character is unfocused, impulsive, and intuitive. Their inherent qualities exist in opposition to each other, and the conflict in their relationship exists because they need each other, much in the same way as Nietzsche proposed. Using these character types means that playwrights have a built-in sense of conflict between the characters, and they can choose to heighten the conflict through plot or by continuing to develop the characters. Two characters who share very different traits but still rely on each other to exist, as the Apollo and Dionysian figures do, already have some amount of friction that a playwright can build a compelling story on top of.

David Ives' 2010 drama *Venus in Fur* is a strong example of how the use of the Apollonian/Dionysian duality can strengthen a story and build compelling conflict. In *Venus in Fur*, the character Thomas is a playwright/director who is attempting to find the perfect actress to play the lead woman in his new version of *Venus in Furs*, based on the 1870 novel written by Sacher-Masoch, but continues to be unsuccessful due to his rigid and unrealistic standards. When the actress Vanda (conveniently sharing her name with the character Thomas is casting) who desperately wants the role shows up to Thomas' apartment, she appears in a flurry of ditzy, unfocused conversation that hides a deep intelligence and sensuality. By setting up these two seemingly opposite characters, Ives leans on the framework that Nietzsche proposed, which creates an immediate tension between them. The relationship between the Apollonian and Dionysian figures are constantly in conflict with each other by design, and their differences are what draws them to each other. There is very little plot-driven conflict in *Venus in Furs* as there was in the Greek tragedy Nietzsche was writing about, as most of the conflict in the play is centered around the tension between the two characters, which is driven by the fundamental forces underpinning them.

Thomas is the Apollonian figure in the show – he is practical, rational, and certain, seeking to make the best play that he can. His abrasiveness and undeniably misogynistic attitude towards the potential actresses for his play are rooted in his ambition – this is of course not an excuse for Thomas' misogyny, though the play does not attempt to rationalize it or excuse it either. He seems at least somewhat invested in truth, at least as it pertains to trying to catch Vanda in her white lies. The Apollonian operates in the world of dreams, Nietzsche says, and while Thomas appears to be too practical to be a dreamer, his writing does reveal truths about himself that he won't consciously accept — much in the same ways that dreams do. When Vanda asks him about the origins of the character Kushemski's desire to be humiliated by a powerful woman:

THOMAS: This stupid, impoverished world we live in! Why are we so eager to diminish ourselves? Why do we want to reduce ourselves to examples of something? As if we were nothing but proof of Freud, or proof of whatever dime store psychology is in People Magazine this week.

What are you going to throw at me next, 'race, class and gender'?

VANDA: You oughta write all that up and send it to the Times.

THOMAS: I did. They didn't print it. (Ives 2017)

By intellectualizing Vanda's question about the childhood origins of Kushemski's sexual proclivities, Thomas denies that he bears any resemblance to the male protagonist of the play he is writing, but it is clear to everyone but himself that he is writing a fantasy version of himself who achieves all his repressed sexual desires.

Vanda, on the other hand, is the manifestation of the Dionysian drive. Nietzsche describes the Dionysian as intoxication, and though Vanda herself is not literally intoxicated at any point in the play, she does possess an abandon in her desires and actions; she doesn't hesitate to act on an impulse or to say what is on her mind.

VANDA: (...) How come you didn't put in that scene with Venus? When she appears to him at the beginning? Naked under a fur in front of a fireplace?

THOMAS: I didn't know how to fit it in.

VANDA: Just stick it in at the top – so to speak – before he meets Vanda. (...) I'll do it. Naked onstage? Fuck. I'll take a freebie.

THOMAS: I'll think about it.

VANDA: Why? We can improv it. Maybe you'll get some ideas. Okay, I'm Venus now. (*She undoes her dress and steps out of it so that she is again in bra and panties.*) Imagine me totally naked.

THOMAS: You're not coming on to me now, are you, Vanda?

VANDA: Come on, you're a big boy. (...)

THOMAS: I've never done this before.

VANDA: That's what all the girls say.

There is palpable eroticism to Vanda's demeanor, which is visible both in her brazen behaviour and in the way she chooses to flirt with Thomas throughout the play. Her brash words are impulsive in a way that grates on Thomas, but there is a calculated strategy to them; they are perfectly selected to bring a certain reaction out of him.

This is the nature of the Apollonian/Dionysian

relationship. They seek constantly to overpower each other, but ultimately the Dionysian aims to destroy the individual, and the Apollonian will forever succumb to the desires brought out by its counterpart. Such is the case with *Venus*. Nietzsche writes that the effect brought out by the Dionysian appalls the Apollonian, but ultimately the Dionysian brings out the Apollonian's "hidden substratum of suffering and knowledge" (32) that they were ultimately hiding from within themselves. Thomas' desire to be dominated, to be consumed by eroticism, is one he denies to himself until he meets Vanda, who pushes him by embodying the dominatrix character he has written out of an unrealized desire.

Natalie Wynn posits that another essential element of this relationship is Apollo's envy of Dionysus – for all of Apollo's self-control and optimism, he envies the drunken ecstasy of Dionysus, who manages to create art just the same as Apollo. The envy between the Apollonian and Dionysian can also be easily seen between Thomas and Vanda. While envy is certainly not the driving force of their relationship, Thomas resents Vanda's passionate but frivolous behaviour and her valley-girl speech. His resentment is rooted in the envy that he feels for her ability to act according to her whims, with no concern for orderliness or artistic rigor – at least his definition of rigor. Her lack of sexual inhibitions also provokes him, because he envies that he feels as though he should keep his own desires repressed. Despite his resentment, Thomas needs Vanda to harness her own confidence in order for him to express his desires.

The sexual tension between Vanda and Thomas is the prime example of the Apollonian/Dionysian tug-of-war in the play. When Vanda asks him if his play, which heavily features sadomasochism at the hands of a dominatrix figure, has any relevance in his own life and sexual tastes, Thomas denies it and insists that he is purely writing fiction that has nothing to do with his own desires. It is clear from the beginning that he is writing this play because he is compelled by this sexual fantasy, and his orderly and focused personality leads him to using his writing as a vessel for his more inconvenient desires. Vanda, on the other hand, relishes in the sexual energy she has, unafraid to reveal her mostly naked body to Thomas and to begin to dominate him in real life when the script calls for it. Her demeanor reflects the drunken ecstasy that is an essential part of the Dionysian

spirit. The ways in which she approaches sexuality is fearless and unabashed. Though it's unclear whether she herself enjoys dominating Thomas in the same way he enjoys being dominated by her, Vanda has no problem pulling his desires out of him and doesn't share the same hangups that Thomas does. The push and pull of a character who wishes to deny their more uncontrollable desires and their counterpart who feels no need to conceal it or hide from pleasure is the epitome of the Apollonian/Dionysian polarity.

The conflict between the Apollonian and Dionysian traits, however, rests on the fact that these characters are being their true selves, and that the force that moves them is a core part of who they are, which dictates their behaviour. In *Venus in Fur*, the end of the play involves the reveal that Vanda is, in fact, the goddess Aphrodite, who intentionally appeared to Thomas in the same way a fictional version of her appears in his play. This reversal implies that Vanda/Aphrodite orchestrated this entire situation in order to get a desired reaction out of Thomas, which makes it unclear whether she in fact fits in this Dionysian category, or whether she simply embodies that energy in order to counter Thomas' stalwart Apollonian personality. In this light, Vanda as a character who embodies Dionysus feels unexpectedly pernicious – as though Ives writes her as a wish-fulfillment fantasy of a woman. Having a woman, especially one who appears out of nowhere to a man and provoking him only to fulfill all of the ecstatic sexual fantasies that he has harbored but was too tightly wound to approach on his own, gives the impression of a male fantasy that has little concern for building a fleshed-out character. The Apollonian/Dionysian character duality can quickly become stereotypical and demeaning when the playwright begins to play into this notion of (impulsive, passionate, intuitive) women who exist to unlock (logical, orderly, driven) men's sexual fantasies and serve no other purpose. At the end of the play, Vanda abruptly pulls back from the scene she is acting out with Thomas to tell him that his play is sexist, wish-fulfillment pornography that degrades women. It seems as though Ives wanted to frame this scene as Thomas getting his feminist comeuppance and being told what's what by Aphrodite herself, but ultimately this doesn't read in the way he intended. Ives' attitude towards Thomas' sexist language and attitudes towards actresses (and presumably women in general) doesn't seem to take any issue with the way Thomas speaks, and any analysis to the contrary, while

not invalid, seems to write off Ives' own sexist blind spots. Vanda/Aphrodite can tell Thomas off for being sexist and writing women in a demeaning way that is nothing but his sexual wish fulfillment, but ultimately, she did give him the sexual fantasy he's always wanted. Her criticism of him is undermined by the fact that he received everything he wanted from her, and she is left feeling demeaned and upset by it, having gotten nothing in return from him.

Nietzsche's writings on theatre provided a completely new lens through which theatre can be analyzed, and his ideas have continued to persist, in ways he might not have initially intended. Though the world of theatre has mostly moved on from the classic Greek styles of theatre, certain elements continue to re-emerge in new ways. The duality of the Apollonian/Dionysian forces have begun to appear as recognizable character types in contemporary theatre, operating in mostly the same way as Nietzsche originally described. While *Venus in Fur* is a strong example of this, it also provides a model for how these character dynamics can become demeaning if the characters are not fleshed out enough. The duality of the two energies is a compelling building block for character development, but when the characters don't grow or change over the course of the story, especially when there is a sexual element to the relationship, it can easily become reductive and objectifying.

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