

# VITA & VIRGINIA: WOMEN OF LETTERS



"These Sapphists love women," dryly comments a sexually terrified, but nevertheless intrigued Virginia Woolf (Eileen Atkins) after her initial meeting with the "florid, mustached, parakeet colored" Vita Sackville-West (Vanessa Redgrave). "She gave me a great deal of pain. No doubt that's the first stage of intimacy."

Vita is equally enthralled with the Bloomsbury *Dona*: "I simply adore her," she confides to the audience.

"She is... silent until she wants to say something and then says it supremely well. She dresses quite atrociously." The year is 1922, the city London, and the two literary greats embark on an intensely deep affair which gradually blossoms into a long-standing, close friendship conducted mainly through letters.

These letters, intersected with each other to create a kind of dialogue, provide the grist for *Vita & Virginia* playing Off-Broadway at the Union Square theater until March 19th. Written by Atkins, who first portrayed Woolf in her critically acclaimed Broadway show, *A Room of One's Own* in 1991, and directed by Zoe Caldwell, *Vita & Virginia* is not so much a play with a plot and formative structure, but a performed literary piece driven by the sheer talent of two extraordinarily great actresses.

While never actually being in the same room with each other, the play's clever construction not only conveys the pair's intimate, sometimes painful, often hilarious relationship, but also embellishes the diverse lives each woman lived. Vita travels incessantly with her diplomat (and gay) husband, Harold Nicholson, vividly recounts to Virginia the deserts of Persia, the mountains of Colorado, the tensions in Berlin. "I will bring you silks and scents and try and corrupt you..." Vita promises. "I am your sacrifice."

Virginia, who never ventures far from her North London enclave, writes in a "sordid room," attends literary parties that are "like old cheese, fascinatingly repulsive" and details the banal minutiae of life in the Bloomsbury set. She dwells on such topics as the illusions of life, the allure of death. "It is one experience I shall never describe," she muses with morose humor. "Look your last on all things lovely," she recites later, more serious.

The pair continually discuss their word-smith craft, Virginia always the master, Vita, the awed but often pouting pupil. After reading one of Virginia's books, Vita says in a familiar moment of truth, "I feel both dejected

and encouraged - dejected because I will never write like that, and encouraged because I know someone who can."

Atkins' Virginia is austere but witty, confident but vulnerable. She convincingly melds the complex aspects of Woolf's personality: the formidable *artiste* whose novels are considered among this century's finest with the fragile, often isolated woman, prone to bouts of depression, melancholy and mental breakdowns. She is oddly human - vainly cutting off her hair, curtailing her hairpins from dropping in her soup. She suffers poor health, is often needy and peevish, and sometimes irrationally difficult. However, Woolf's literary prowess is never undermined by her moody neuroses; she is more than fueled by the erratic proclivities of her imagination. This is definitely Virginia's story.

Redgrave's Vita throws herself confidently about the stage, emboldened by her aristocratic privilege and patrician heritage. She rants about pet-topics like the injustice of the banning of Radclyffe Hall's *Well of Loneliness*; delights her audiences with schoolgirl wonder and rapture over such simplicities as birdsong and moonlight; devours women lovers with equal measures of passion and ferocity. She agonizes over her absences from Virginia, but is not sorry for her many affairs d'amour. Vita is a fabulous diva.

Despite a thoroughly unimaginative set and lackluster lighting, *Vita & Virginia* is a brilliant piece of dramaturgy, only achievable on stage. Atkins and Redgrave deliver riveting performances, indicative of both women's rich association with the English theatre. The correspondence is skillfully dissected and reassembled, highlighting the remarkable rapport between these two women of letters.

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