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THEATRE: Vita And Virginia at Pentameters

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Valerie Dent and Tamar K Karpas in Vita and Virginia

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by JULIA RANK

VITA AND VIRGINIA
Pentameters Theatre

VALERIE Dent and Tamar K Karpas in Vita and Virginia

Vita and Virginia is Iambic Pentameters' first co-production after Brighton-based Iambic Arts' Emma D'Arcy and Hampstead's Pentameters Theatre's Léonie Scott-Matthews were recently reunited for the first time since the 1960s.

Eileen Atkins's script (I hesitate to call it a play) charts the 20-year relationship between The Hon Vita Sackville-West (Lady Nicolson) of Knole and Mrs Woolf of Bloomsbury, using their letters and diaries and was originally performed by herself and Vanessa Redgrave as Virginia and Vita respectively.

Before they met, the pair moved in quite different circles: Virginia belonged to the upper-middle class intelligentsia and, despite their lack of physical intimacy, enjoyed a happy marriage with her devoted Leonard.

On the other hand, the aristocratic Vita was openly Sapphic with quite the reputation for "breaking down ramparts".

Their courtship subverted and adhered to conventional romantic norms, with the assured, trouser-clad Vita taking the traditionally masculine role and Virginia the pursued object of her desires.

Valerie Dent is charming as the dowdily dressed, hairpin-trailing Virginia. Her Virginia is something of a virginal ingénue, flattered by the attentions of such a glamorous figure that gradually cut through her emotional repression.

As the more sensual Vita, who according to Virginia wrote with a "pen of brass", Tamar K Karpas brings a touch of the exotic and determined persistence.

Atkins assumes a considerable amount of prior knowledge on the audience's parts, so a certain familiarity with Vanessa, Clive, Lytton et al is helpful so that one doesn't feel out of the loop with all the namedropping and literary bitchiness.



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The most lasting fruit of this romance was the gender-bending novel Orlando, born out of Virginia's jealousy of Vita's relationships with other women. For Vita, it inspired a "new form of narcissism" by falling in love with her literary portrait – how very post-modern.

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