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VITA & VIRGINIA

A Play

by Eileen Atkins

Adapted from the correspondence between
Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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ISBN 978-0-573-13012-0

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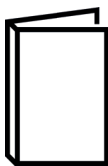
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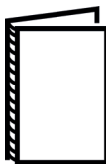


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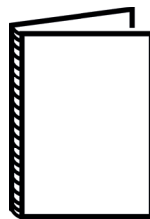
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dame Eileen June Atkins, DBE was born 16 June 1934. An English actress and occasional screenwriter. She has worked in the theatre, film, and television consistently since 1953. She has won several Major acting awards including three Olivier's, one BAFTA and one Emmy. She was appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in 1990 and Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire (DBE) in 2001.

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by Eileen Atkins

Adapted from correspondence between
Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West

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VITA AND VIRGINIA

First presented in the Minerva Studio, Chichester Festival Theatre, on 8th September 1992, with the following cast:

VITA SACKVILLE- WEST
VIRGINIA WOOLF

Penelope Wilton
Eileen Atkins

Directed by Patrick Garland
Designed by Lucy Hall

This production was subsequently presented by Robert Fox Limited and Lewis Allen at the Ambassadors Theatre, London, on 1st October 1993 with the same cast.

It was presented by Lewis Allen, Robert Fox Ltd, Julian Schlossberg with Mitchell Maxwell and Alan J. Schuster at the Union Square Theatre, New York, on 21st November, 1994, with the following cast:

VITA SACKVILLE-WEST
VIRGINIA WOOLF

Vanessa Redgrave
Eileen Atkins

Directed by Zoe Caldwell
Sets by Ben Edwards
Costumes by Jane Greenwood

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Eileen Atkins would like to thank Nigel Nicolson and Olivia and Quentin Bell without whose co-operation this production would not have been possible.

New York, June 1995

ACT I

This piece should be played as one long conversation except where it is indicated that the characters speak to the audience.

The lights come up.

VITA (*to the audience*) I simply adore Virginia Woolf and so would you, I met her last night at a party. She is utterly unaffected, nothing planned or self-conscious. She is both detached and human, silent till she wants to say something and then says it supremely well. She dresses quite atrociously. Last night she was wearing orange woollen stockings and had pinned together her silk rags with a gold brooch. She is quite old. I've rarely taken such a fancy to anyone and I think she likes me.

VIRGINIA (*to the audience*) I'm too muzzy-headed to make out anything. This is partly the result of dining to meet Mr and Mrs Harold Nicolson last night at Clive Bell's. She the lovely, gifted, aristocratic Vita Sackville-West—not much to my severer taste—florid, moustached, parakeet-coloured, with all the supple ease of the aristocracy but not the wit of the artist. She has her hand on all the ropes, makes me feel virgin-shy and schoolgirlish. Yet after dinner I rapped out opinions. She is a grenadier; hard, handsome, manly, inclined to a double chin. She is a pronounced Sapphist and may, thinks Ethel Sands, have an eye on me, old though I am.

VITA Dear Mrs Woolf,

I write this tonight, because I think you said you were going to Spain on the twenty-seventh and I want it to reach you before you go. The PEN Club Committee are very anxious for you to join the club, and at their request I proposed you.

There was a little shout of excitement from the Committee about you, and Galsworthy got up and made a curtsy, so to speak.

VIRGINIA Dear Mrs Nicolson,

But I wish you could be induced to call me Virginia.

VITA My dear Virginia,

You see I don't take much inducing. Could you be induced likewise, do you think?

VIRGINIA Dear Mrs Nicolson,

The secretary of the PEN Club has written to me to say that I have been elected a member. Very regretfully I have had to decline—since I see from the club papers that it is wholly a dining club, and my experience is that I can't belong to dining clubs. But I'm very sorry, as I should like to know the members, and see you also. But this last I hope can be managed in other ways. Could you be persuaded to write a story for the Hogarth Press?

VITA I hope that no-one has ever yet, or ever will, thrown down a glove I was not ready to pick up. On the peaks of Italian mountains, and beside green lakes, I am writing a story for you. I shut my eyes to the blue of gentians. I shut my ears to the brawling of rivers; I shut my nose to the scent of pines; I concentrate on my story, and to you alone, it shall be dedicated. Will you ever play truant to Bloomsbury and culture, I wonder, and come travelling with me? Will you come next year to the place where the Gypsies of all nations make an annual pilgrimage to some Madonna or other? I am going. I think you had much better come too. Look on it, if you like, as copy—as I believe you look upon everything, human relationships included. Oh yes, you like people better through the brain than through the heart. And then, I don't believe one ever knows people in their own surroundings; one only knows them away; divorced from all the little strings and cobwebs of habit. Either *I* am at home, and you are strange; or *you* are at home, and

I am strange; so neither is the real essential person, and confusion results. But in the Basque provinces, among a horde of zingaros, we should both be equally strange and equally real and I think you had better make up your mind to take a holiday and come.

VIRGINIA My dear *Vita*,

I enjoyed your intimate letter from the Dolomites. It gave me a great deal of pain—which is I've no doubt the first stage of intimacy. You say I've "no friends, no heart, only an indifferent head". Nevermind: I enjoyed your abuse very much. But I will not go on else I should write you a really intimate letter, and then you would dislike me, more, even more, than you do.

VITA Aren't you a pig, to make me feel one? I have searched my brain to remember what on earth in my letter could have given you "a great deal of pain". Or was it just one of your phrases, poked at me? Anyhow, that wasn't my intention, as you probably know. Do you ever mean what you say, or say what you mean? Or do you just enjoy baffling the people who try to creep a little nearer? "Dislike you more, even more." Dear Virginia, said she putting her cards on the table, you know very well that I like you a fabulous lot.

VIRGINIA But really and truly you did say—I can't remember exactly what, but to the effect that I made copy out of all my friends, and cared with head, not with the heart. As I say, I forget; and so we'll consider it cancelled!... I like the story very very much—in fact, I began reading it after you left, went out for a walk, thinking of it all the time, and came back and finished it, being full of a particular kind of interest which I daresay has something to do with its being the sort of thing I should like to write myself.

VITA I have walked on air all day since getting your letter. I am more pleased than I can tell you at your approval. Altogether after reading it I felt like a stroked cat.

VIRGINIA "Look on it, if you like, as copy, as I believe you look upon everything, human relationships included". Oh yes,

you like people better “through the brain than through the heart”, etc: so there. Come and be forgiven.

VITA I came to Tavistock Square today. I went upstairs and rang your bell—I went downstairs and rang your bell. Nothing but dark inhospitable stairs confronted me. So I went away disconsolate. I wanted (a) to see you; (b) to ask you to sign two of your books which my mother had; (c) to be forgiven.

VIRGINIA You have added to your sins by coming here without telephoning—I was only rambling the streets to get a breath of air—could easily have stayed in, wanted very much to see you. I will sign as many books as Lady Sackville wants. No: I will not forgive you. Your book, *Seducers in Equador* looks very pretty, rather like a ladybird. The title however slightly alarms the old gentlemen in Bumpuses Bookshop.

VITA I have been horribly remiss in writing to thank you for *Mrs Dalloway*, but as I didn’t want to write you the how-charming-of-you-to-send-me-your-book-I-am-looking-forward-to-reading-it-so-much sort of letter, I thought I would wait until I had read both it and *The Common Reader*, which I am sorry to say I have now done. Sorry, because although I shall read them again, the first excitement of following you along an unknown road is over. There are passages of *The Common Reader* that I should like to know by heart; it is superb; there is no more to be said. I can’t think of any book I like better or will reread more often. *Mrs Dalloway* is different; its beauty is in its brilliance chiefly; it bewilders, illuminates, and reveals; *The Common Reader* grows into a guide, philosopher and friend, while *Mrs Dalloway* remains a will-of-the-wisp, a dazzling and lovely acquaintance.

VIRGINIA Hah ha! I thought you wouldn’t like *Mrs Dalloway*. On the other hand, I thought you might like *The Common Reader*, and I’m very glad that you do—all the more that it’s just been conveyed to me that Logan Pearsall Smith thinks it’s “very disappointing”. But oh, how one’s friends bewilder one!—partly, I suppose, the result of bringing out

two books at the same time. I'm trying to bury my head in the sand, or play a game of racing my novel against my criticism according to the opinions of my friends. Sometimes *Mrs Dalloway* wins, sometimes *The Common Reader*. And I have one of my wretched headaches.

VITA Last Friday at midnight I stood on the top of your Downs, and, looking down over various lumps of blackness, tried to guess which valley contained Rodmell and you asleep therein. And now comes your letter, making me think that on the contrary you were probably awake and in pain. But knowing nothing of that at the time, I reluctantly recovered my dogs who had been galloping madly across the Downs, climbed into the motor, and drove through the sleeping villages of Sussex and Kent, with the secret knowledge in my own mind that I had paid you a visit of which you knew nothing, —more romantic than the cup of tea to which your husband, Leonard, had bidden me on Saturday. I have been making a tiny garden of Alpines in an old stone trough, —a real joy. Shall I make an even tinier one for you? In a seed pan, with Lilliputian rocks?

VIRGINIA Tell me who you've been seeing; even if I have never heard of them—that will be all the better. I try to invent you for myself, but find I really have only two twigs and three straws to do it with. I can get the sensation of seeing you—hair, lips, colour, height, even, now and then, the eyes and hands, but I find you going off, to walk in the garden, to play tennis, to dig, to sit smoking and talking, and then I can't invent a thing you say—This proves what I could write reams about—how little we know anyone, only movements and gestures, nothing connected, continuous, profound. But give me a hint I implore.

VITA I am going to Brighton today, over your Downs, and shall leave this letter on your doorstep together with your garden-in-a-saucer. But it will be very tantalizing, stopping at your house. I shan't even ring the bell, and trust to luck that Leonard will fall over the saucer as he goes out.

VIRGINIA Oh you scandalous ruffian! To come as far as this house and make off! When the cook came up to me with your letter, and your flowers and your garden, with the story that a lady had stopped a little boy in the village and given him them I was so furious I almost sprang after you in my nightgown.

VITA You are a very, very remarkable person. Of course I always knew that—it is an easy thing to know—the *Daily Express* knows it—the *Times* knows it—the *Daily Herald* quotes you as an authority on the vexed question as to whether one should cross the road to dine with Wordsworth—but I feel strongly that I have only tonight thoroughly and completely realized how remarkable you really are. You see, you accomplish so much. Yet you give the impression of having infinite leisure. One comes to see you: you are prepared to spend two hours of time in talk. One may not, for reasons of health, come to see you: you write divine letters. You read bulky manuscripts. You advise on grocers. You produce books which occupy a permanent place on one's bedside shelf next to Gerard Manly Hopkins and the Bible. You cast a beam across the dingy landscape of the *Times Literary Supplement*. You set up type. You offer to read and to criticize one's poems,—criticize, meaning illumination, not complete disheartenment which is the legacy of other critics. How is it done? I can only suppose that you don't fritter. Now here am I, alone at midnight, and I survey my day, and I ask myself what I have done with it. I finished the hop picking article for Leonard, found an envelope and a stamp, and sent it off. I planted perhaps a hundred bulbs. I played tennis with my son, I endeavoured to amuse my other son, who has whooping-cough, and tries to crack jokes between the bouts. I read a detective story in my bath. I talked to a carpenter. I wrote five lines of poetry. Now what does all that amount to? Nothing. Just fritter. And yet it represents a better day than I have spent for a long time.

VIRGINIA Do keep it up—your belief that I achieve things. I assure you, I have need of all your illusions after six weeks

of lying in bed, drinking milk, now and then turning over and answering a letter. We go back on Friday; what have I achieved? Nothing. Hardly a word written, masses of complete trash read, you not seen? The blessed headache goes—I catch a cold or argue violently and it comes back. But now it has gone longer than ever before, so if I can resist the delights of chatter, I shall be robust for ever. But what I was going to say was to ask for more illusions. I can assure you, if you'll make me up, I'll make you up.

VITA I wish that you were well and that I could come and see you. I wrote to you at Rodmell before I knew you were going back to London. You will receive this one before the other. I will therefore conceal from you the destination of my journeying, so that the other letter should not be deprived of its little bit of news. Although news is the last thing one wants or expects to find in letters. I will only tell you that I am not going to the Riviera or Italy, or even Egypt, but some country wild, beautiful and unsophisticated; further away in time, though not in space, than China.

VIRGINIA But for how long? For ever? I am filled with envy and despair. Think of seeing Persia—think of never seeing you again. The doctor has sent me to bed: all writing forbidden. So this is my swan song.

VITA No, not for ever. And not even immediately. Harold goes next month, and I follow in January, to return in May, and then go again next October. So you see there will be a good deal of coming and going. I've evolved some theories about friendship. I think, among other things, that the set hour is full of peril; what one wants is the sudden desultory talk,—the look-up from the book one is reading, the burst of argument between two regions of silence. All this is to invite your attention to the advantages of my country home, Long Barn, as a convalescent home.

VIRGINIA The doctor says I may go away. Would you like me to come to you for a day or two, if you are alone, before the

twentieth? I expect this is too late and too difficult; I only suggest it on the off chance.

VITA I would love you to come, as you know.

VIRGINIA Would Tuesday afternoon suit you? Should I stay till Friday or Saturday? Should Leonard come and fetch me back? Should you mind if I only brought one dressing-gown? Should I be a nuisance if I had breakfast in bed?

VITA You can have breakfast, lunch and dinner in bed if you feel like it. Yes, bring a dressing-gown. Yes, let Leonard come whenever he likes. (*To the audience*) I fetched her and brought her down to Long Bam.

Both sit together.

VIRGINIA (*to the audience*) These Sapphists *love* women. Their friendship is never untinged with amorosity. I like her and being with her and the splendour—she shines in the grocer's shop in Sevenoaks with a candlelit radiance, standing on legs like beech trees, pink glowing, grape-clustered, pearl hung. She found me incredibly dowdy.

VITA (*to the audience*) She had got on a new dress. It was very odd indeed, orange and black with a hat to match—a sort of top hat made of straw with two orange feathers, like Mercury's wings—but although odd it was curiously becoming and it pleased Virginia because there could be absolutely no doubt as to which was the front and which was the back.

VIRGINIA (*to the audience*) She said she knew no-one who cared less for personal appearance—no-one put on things the way I did. Yet I was so beautiful, etc. What is the effect of all this on me? Very mixed. There is her maturity and her voluptuousness, her being so much in full sail on high tides, where I am coasting down backwaters; her capacity, I mean, to take the floor in any company, to represent her country, to visit Chatsworth, to control silver, servants, show dogs, her motherhood, her being in short what I have never been,

a real woman. And she lavishes on me maternal protection which for some reason is what I've always wanted from everyone.

VITA (*to the audience*) She is an exquisite companion. She's so vulnerable under all that brilliance. I love her dearly but I don't want to get landed in an affair which might get beyond my control. Harold says it would be like smoking over a petrol tank.

VIRGINIA (*to the audience*) I was always sexually cowardly. My terror of real life has always kept me in a nunnery. Clive and now Vita call me a fish and I reply while holding hands and getting exquisite pleasure from contact with either male or female body. But what I want of you is illusion, to make the world dance.

VITA (*to the audience*) I'm scared to death of arousing physical feelings in her because of the madness. I don't know what effect that would have you see, and that is a fire with which I have no wish to play.

VIRGINIA I have left behind a raincoat, a crystal ruler, a diary for the year 1903, a pair of scarlet gloves, a brooch and a hot-water bottle, so contemplate complete nudity by the end of the year. I am very very charming; and Vita is a dear old rough-coated sheep dog. I am dashing off to buy another pair of gloves. Now for a bus down Southampton Row. Ah, but I like being with Vita.

VITA And it's on Wednesday fortnight that I go to Persia. What effect does absence have on you? Does it work like the decreasing charm of your Dog Grizzle, which endears her to you the more? I hope so.

VIRGINIA I have just taken Grizzle to a vet in the Gray's Inn Road. Ah, if you want my love for ever and ever you must break out in spots on your back.

VITA Why does one ever read anybody but Shakespeare? He is coming to Persia with me—the complete works. Such a fuss here. The luggage all plastered with labels. Things scattered

all over the room. And my cousin Eddy chattering while I try to remember what I have to pack. “Do you know T. S. Eliot?” No, I don’t. Kodak films, aspirin, fur gloves, tooth powder. “Aren’t the woodcuts in the *Anatomy of Melancholy* too lovely!” “No, Eddy, I think they are quite awful. —Don’t put my riding boots in my suitcase, one doesn’t ride on board ship.” “Shall I have my sitting-room pink or yellow?” And so on. So is my packing conducted.

VIRGINIA Do not snuff the stinking tallow out of your heart. Poor Virginia to wit and Dog Grizzle.

VITA I am reduced to a thing that wants Virginia. I composed a beautiful letter to you in the sleepless nightmare hours of the night, and it has all gone: I miss you, in a quite simple desperate human way. You would never write so elementary a phrase as that; you’d clothe it in so exquisite a phrase that it would lose a little of its reality. Whereas with me it is quite stark: I miss you even more than I could have believed; and I was prepared to miss you a good deal. So this is just really a squeal of pain.

VIRGINIA But why do you think I don’t feel, or that I make phrases? “Lovely phrases”, you say, which rob things of reality. Just the opposite. Always, always, always I try to say what I feel. Will you then believe that after you went last Tuesday—exactly a week ago—out I went into the slums of Bloomsbury, to find a barrel organ. But it didn’t make me cheerful and ever since, nothing important has happened—somehow it’s dull and damp. I have been dull; I have missed you. I do miss you. I shall miss you. And if you don’t believe it, you’re a long-eared owl and ass. Lovely phrases...? Yes, I miss you, I miss you. I dare not expatiate, because you will say I am not stark, and cannot feel the things dumb people feel. You know that is rather rotten rot, my dear Vita. After all, what is a lovely phrase? One that has mopped up as much truth as it can hold—Also, you’ll be so excited, happy and all that. You’ll have forgotten me. I’ll cut a very poor show against Teheran.

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