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## Story of writer Woolf's wild affair hits the big screen

Their love shocked and scandalized the English upper classes—two married women conducting an affair in front of their husbands. What is more, the novel that came out of their tempestuous relationship changed literature forever. Now a movie tells the story of novelist Virginia Woolf's all-consuming passion for her fellow writer and adventurer, Vita Sackville-West, who she immortalized as the gender-shifting, time-travelling hero of her masterpiece, "Orlando".

Which is why theirs is a romance for our gender fluid times, argues Chanya Button, the director of "Vita & Virginia". The aristocratic and bohemian poet Sackville-West was already famous when Woolf met her in 1925, a bestselling writer and free spirit notorious for her bisexual relationships with a string of other blue-blooded socialites. Despite her brilliance, Woolf was by contrast dogged by fragile mental health, tightly shepherded by her husband Leonard Woolf, with whom she had founded the Hogarth Press, which published the poet T. S. Eliot and the first English translations of Freud. Yet when they came together there was a spark that pushed both on to create some of their very best work, Button told AFP.

## Free living and loving

Virginia introduced Vita to the free-living and -loving Bloomsbury set, the hugely influential group of artists and intellectuals that also included E.M. Forster, the



Chanya Button, the British writer-director behind 'Vita & Virginia'.

economist John Maynard Keynes and the trail-blazing biographer Lytton Strachey. British filmmaker Button said she wanted to make "an adult love story" about two women "in the chaos and intoxication of falling in love and negotiating that through their marriages." "So many of the films about love I grew up with feel adolescent," she added. "They are all about the getting together.

"I wanted to make a mature love story, to explore how they lived the relationship in regard to their marriages. They were both women who broke all the rules—in Virginia's case the whole form of the novel—so I had to break the rules of period drama in my own small way. Period dramas are usually about a lovely chat in a lovely room. I tried to make it be about how it felt." Button also paints a sympathetic portrait of the pair's husbands, the rather upright political theorist Woolf and the debonair bisexual writer and diplomat Harold Nicolson. "There are some historians who say that Leonard Woolf was very controlling. But I think he had an incredibly progressive approach to supporting her mental health. "In order to remain healthy Virginia needed a particular routine and her husband was a huge part of that.

## 'Captivating and earthy'

"As for Vita and Harold Nicolson, they loved each other so much. There was a long and great marriage," Button said. "They both had needs and desires outside the confines of a heterosexual marriage and they let each other have the freedom to have those relationships. They had their open, unconventional marriages, but they had feelings about it. They weren't robots. "Harold had struggles with the relationship with Virginia," and Leonard Woolf suffered too, as Button discovered when she read one of his letters.

"He talks about jealousy and says that he doesn't recognize it as an emotion. 'Wow!' I thought as I read it. "If you need to know only one thing about a person, that is him," she added. Woolf clearly realized that Vita was essential for his wife's creative life, Button believed. "You can understand how Vita was muse-like to Virginia because she was incredibly captivating and earthy, and her body was there for her in a way that Virginia's wasn't." But their passion helped free her.

Vita's son, the writer Nigel Nicolson, later described Woolf's "Orlando" as "the longest and most charming love letter in literature". Button used CGI in the film to reproduce "the moments when Virginia broke from reality", often prompted by Vita, when her mind walked the thin "boundary between vulnerability and creativity. She wobbles but she also has a brilliant idea," the director said, adding that she tried "to capture the full 'Technicolor' of the instances Woolf described, those 'vulnerable moments sometimes we are most alive'. It's not the first time Virginia Woolf has been depicted on film. Nicole Kidman won a best actress Oscar for her portrayal of the groundbreaking novelist in the 2002 psychodrama "The Hours". — AFP

## 'Operaholic' Domingo powers into record books

When Peter Gelb took over New York's legendary Metropolitan Opera in 2006, one of his jobs was to organise a farewell for Plácido Domingo. But 13 years later the indefatigable Spanish tenor is still "the king of opera", headlining France's oldest musical festival at Orange at the weekend. "Since it was unimaginable that he could possibly be singing for much longer after an unmatched Met career that was soon to span four decades of starring roles," Gelb told AFP, "one of the responsibilities I was preparing for was Plácido's farewell." With many singers' voices withering by the time they hit their forties, the unfailingly modest 78-year-old has somehow managed to keep performing at the top level. "Instead of retiring, Plácido apparently discovered his own fountain of youth, reinventing himself as a baritone," Gelb said.

## 'Impossible to achieve again'

"This past season, we held ceremonies for Plácido on several occasions in honor of his five decades of leading roles on the stage of the Met—an accomplishment that is impossible to imagine ever being achieved again," Gelb added. Indeed the singer, who was one of the Three Tenors alongside Luciano Pavarotti and Jose Carreras, set a new record in May by singing his 151th role. A month earlier he had celebrated his 4,000th performance in a career that stretches back 60 years. But Domingo knows he has to look after himself, cancelling interviews after rehearsals on Friday in the southern French town of Orange to preserve his voice having recently pulled out of appearing in "La Traviata" in Munich.

He was in Orange for a "Spanish Night" to celebrate zarzuela, the particularly Hispanic music theatre genre which his parents—both singers themselves—did so much

to preserve. Backstage at the ancient Roman theatre, he joked and chatted with the dancers from the Antonio Gades company who were also taking part in the show.

## Punishing schedule

But even for a man half his age, his schedule is punishing. In July alone, as well as Orange, he will sing the title role in "Simon Boccanegra" at Baden-Baden in Germany, then star in Verdi's "Giovanna d'Arco" (Joan of Arc) at the Teatro Real in Madrid, before moving on to Prague for Operalia, the international opera competition he founded in 1993. Domingo will finish the month in Verona's ancient theatre singing "La Traviata".

"Even though he is near 80, as far as Plácido is concerned, there is still no hard stop in sight," Gelb told AFP. "We recently planned performances for him through the 2021/22 season. But that doesn't stop him for pressing for even more roles in the future. "As Plácido gently points out, the house is always fuller when he is performing on our stage... Indeed, it's a successful argument for letting Plácido call the shots as far into the future as he wishes," he added.

## 'Operaholic'

Glorying in being called an "operaholic" in the United States, where he has spent most of his later career as director general of both the Washington and Los Angeles operas, Domingo has made more than 100 albums and picked up 14 Grammy awards. "Besides his record longevity, Plácido's place in opera history is secure as one of the greatest dramatic tenor voices of all time," Gelb said of the singer, who grew up in Mexico singing with his parents' zarzuela company, playing the piano as an accompanist to supplement his income. — AFP



Spanish opera singer Plácido Domingo, 78, performs on stage during the dress rehearsal of 'Spanish Night' at the 150th Choregie in Orange. — AFP



Heather Unruh (right) and her family leave the court house after a pre-trial hearing in the Kevin Spacey sexual assault case at Nantucket District Court in Nantucket, Massachusetts. — AFP

## Sexual assault case against Kevin Spacey on shaky ground

Kevin Spacey may avoid trial for sexual assault, as the case against him suffered a serious blow Monday when his accuser declined to testify due to fear of self-incrimination. William Little accused the actor of groping him in a Massachusetts bar in July 2016. The actor, 59, was charged in January with indecent assault and battery. The Massachusetts District Court judge for Nantucket, the posh island community where the alleged aggression took place, called on Little Monday to testify. Spacey was not present in the court.

But Little chose to plead the Fifth Amendment, which allows citizens not to testify so as not to incriminate themselves, after it was revealed his cell phone—a key piece of evidence in the case—may have been compromised. Little has said he took a smartphone video of the incident, which he says took place when he was an 18-year-old busboy in a Nantucket bar and restaurant. The smartphone images, which Little said he shared with a then-girlfriend and a group of friends, allegedly show Spacey shoving his hand into the teen's pants and fondling him.

But the phone—which the defense wanted to examine—has disappeared, as confirmed by Little and his parents, who were also called upon to testify Monday. A police officer said he returned the phone to the family after extracting all the information but admitted he neglected to ask for a receipt upon return. The family said they never received the phone. Interrogated at length about what he did with the phone and the messages on it, Little insisted that he had not deleted anything.

But when warned that manipulating the information on the phone could result in charges being brought against him, Little pled the fifth. Little's mother Heather Unruh, a television news anchor known in the Boston area, admitted she had deleted some potentially embarrassing photos before giving the phone to the police but said she had not erased anything related to the alleged assault. Spacey's lawyer Alan Jackson insinuated that text messages from Little—who was a fan of the actor—that implied his consent in the situation had been deleted. "This entire case is completely compromised," said Jackson.

"This case needs to be dismissed and it needs to be dismissed today." Although the judge did not make a decision, Spacey's defense team added it would promptly request that the case be dropped. The prosecution did not rule dropping the case, but asked the judge for a week to decide. Spacey has insisted on his innocence in the matter. The charges carry a penalty of up to five years in prison.

The allegation of sexual misconduct against the two-time Oscar winner was one of more than a dozen to emerge since 2017 in the wake of the #MeToo movement—in both the United States and Britain—with devastating effect on his acting career. He was dropped from the cast of the popular "House of Cards" series and from a leading role in director Ridley Scott's "All the Money in the World," Christopher Plummer was brought in as a last-second replacement. — AFP

## German producer of 'Europa, Europa' Brauner dead at 100

One of postwar Germany's most successful film producers, Holocaust survivor Artur Brauner, has died in Berlin aged 100, Culture Minister Monika Gruetters said. Brauner, a Jew born in Poland, made more than 500 pictures for the cinema and television, including masterpieces grappling with the Nazi past such as 1990's "Europa, Europa". "Germany has lost one of the most important film producers of the young federal republic," Gruetters said after Brauner's death in Berlin on Sunday.



In this file photo German film producer Artur 'Atze' Brauner arrives on the red carpet upon arrival at the Berlinale Palace for the opening ceremony of the 68th Berlinale film festival with the premiere of 'Isle of Dogs'. — AFP

"The fact that he, as a once persecuted Polish Jew, went to the country of his family's murderers after World War II to produce films and commit himself to working toward Germany's democratic reconstruction was truly a gift for our country." Born in 1918 in Lodz as the son of a wood merchant, Brauner escaped death in the Nazi extermination camps by hiding in the Soviet Union, one of 800 survivors out of 250,000 Jews from Lodz. But 49 members of his extended family were murdered. Sensing an opportunity to revive the legendary German cinema of the pre-war Weimar Republic, Brauner went to Berlin in the 1946 and started the CCC production company in the city's American occupied sector. On the way to Germany he met his future wife Maria, a Jewish girl from Warsaw travelling on a fake passport. She died last year aged 92.

## 'Gave the dead a voice'

Among his biggest successes was the US-style Western series Winnetou, beloved by generations of Germans. "I produced more films than anyone else around the world. And I knew them all," he said, referring to the greats of international cinema, Berlin daily Der Tagesspiegel quoted him as saying. The success of his early crowd pleasers allowed him to finance wrenching dramas that dealt with German guilt and remembrance of the six million Jews slaughtered by the Nazis. "Europa, Europa" by Polish director Agnieszka Holland told the story of a Jewish orphan who survives the Holocaust by masquerading as a Nazi. It became an international art-house hit. — AFP

Infiniti Al Babtain art gallery event displays local artists handiworks  
'Depicting culture infused with authentic creativity mesmerize audiences'

Abdulmohsen Abdulaziz Al Babtain Co. (AABC), the authorized dealer for Infiniti vehicles in the State of Kuwait recently held its second art exhibition within the Infiniti showroom located in Al Rai.

The unique collection of paintings that decorated the showroom were installed next to the vehicles to present an artistic backdrop to the powerful and elegant Infiniti models. Distinctive in style and expression, participating Kuwaiti artists, Suzan Bushnaq, Suhaila Al-Najdi, Mohammed Al-Kouh and Abdel Hamid Al-Rabah showcased their masterpieces, which were filled with a blend of radiant colors and lines. The paintings depicted the Arabian culture and people, infused with calligraphy and abstract art forms.

Infiniti is more than merely a company that makes cars. It is an organization rooted in a passion to create automobiles with

significance beyond their physical presence. Infiniti is a globally recognized luxury auto brand with a unique vision - one that is bold, vibrant and distinctive.

The Infiniti showroom that is conveniently located in Al-Rai area, marks the triumphant combination for the brand identity. It is given a unique character with its sleek lines and artful luxury expression that fosters privacy and makes it a true masterpiece in the region. The indoor design elements embrace the artful expression of refined power, state of the art responsiveness and ownership experience. Everything was designed to exceed customers' expectations. From the first moment, customers enter the INFINITI showroom or service center they will experience the sleek lines and appealing contours of luxury automobiles.

