

Maxim Gorky wrote plays from 1901 – 36, seventeen in all, and *Vassa Zheleznova* started life in 1910, but was not performed until after he rewrote it in 1935, making it, in a sense, the last he wrote.



In the new production at Almeida Theatre, little seems altered from the original, and, in a sense, it doesn't really need it. Corporate corruption, family infighting, gross inequality, tension between the sexes; what's so different now from then?

Here's how Almeida's website describes Mike Bartlett's adaptation, directed by Tinuke Craig: It's 8am and a revolt is underway.

The father is dying. The son is spying. The wife is cheating. The uncle is stealing. The mother is scheming. The dynasty is crumbling.

One house. One fortune. One victor.

<https://almeida.co.uk/whats-on/vassa/7-oct-2019-23-nov-2019>

Spot on! This is a comedy which breaks the rules; there are deaths, and everyone doesn't end up married in the end. As a matter of fact, few marriages survive in this tale. **Pawn** has seen a lot of theatre on this trip, and not even had the time to write about it all. I will say that this is a lovely and spirited production. The ensemble is strong, with no particular standouts, other than Siobhán Redmond in the titular role, the family matriarch. She dominates the stage, in a *good way*, right from the start, and never lets go. Amber James, as daughter Anna, returning to the family homestead just in time to bid her father rest in peace, turns in a nuanced yet powerful performance.



Siobhán Redmond as Vassa

Due to the dual blights of war and alcoholism, Soviet women from the era of the original production were left to run things, by and large, as so many men had been removed from society — via WW-I, the revolution, and drink. So strong female leads is no shock for a Russian play from the era, and it resonates well today.



Sophie Wu, Siobhán Redmond, and Amber James in *Vassa*

Well designed and presented within Almeida's cozy little space, this is a crowd pleaser, and it certainly provided a light end to my evening, after the matinee of *Death of a Salesman*, earlier in the day.

Oh, and the dinner ***Pawn*** had in the adjoining Almeida Cafe was lovely. Chicken stew with fresh-baked bread, and a Negroni to sip with it. Delightful!

Vassa plays through 23 November at Almeida Theatre, Islington. Booking information at <https://almeida.co.uk/whats-on/vassa/7-oct-2019-23-nov-2019>