

Theater: Arianda Can't Rescue Murky Tales From Red Vienna

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TALES FROM RED VIENNA ** out of ****

MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB

What's the most essential skill for an actor who wants a successful and creatively satisfying career? It's not talent. A lot of actors have talent. A lot of stars don't. But for the lucky few who actually get a shot at shaping their career, the most under-appreciated skill they need is picking the right roles, the right shows, the right talent to work with.

Actress Nina Arianda burst onto the scene with her Tony-winning turn in *Venus In Fur* and has followed up with movies like the gem *Win Win* and Woody Allen's Oscar-winning *Midnight In Paris*, not to mention her Tony-nominated Broadway debut in *Born Yesterday*. *Tales From Red Vienna* is not a similar success but playwright David Grimm is a serious talent with support from The Public, Sundance, Hartford Stage and others. Perhaps they'll click on some future project and her commitment to him will pay off. For now, we have a muddled effort of serious intent that is likely a stumble on the way to further success or -- perhaps -- an indication of questionable taste from her team.

Seeing who can capitalize on opportunity and who cannot is one of the fascinating aspects of the arts that is rarely tracked. With three movies in the bank and producers lining up to capitalize on her instant and well-deserved acclaim, Arianda will surely have plenty of chances to prove her taste is as dependable as her talent.

On paper, it's certainly a plum role. Helena (Arianda) is a war widow in Vienna barely subsisting after her husband died in the trenches of World War I. Fallen on hard times, she has turned to prostitution. Almost as if on cue, an old "friend" Mutzi (Tina Benko) flits back into Helena's life. Wealthy and indifferent to others, Mitzi has come to pay her respects and see how Helena is doing... 18 months after Helena's husband died. In fact, she wants Helena to serve as a discrete cover so Mitzi can take her new young lover Bela (a solid Michael Esper) out on the town. To both Helena and Bela's dismay, they realize he has been a client of hers. But this impassioned young journalist won't leave her alone. Is he toying with her or does he love her? Along for the ride are the great Kathleen Chalfant as Helena's no-nonsense housekeeper and a very appealing Michael Goldsmith as an adoring delivery boy (man! he would say) who loves Helena as only a teenager can.

The play begins arrestingly in Helena's shabby but neat home in the middle of the night. (John Lee Beatty's set hints awkwardly at the Vienna just off stage here, though the home is fine and he offers a very detailed and convincing cemetery later on.) It's dark, not a word is said and the clock ticks ominously on the wall, making clear that something urgent is at hand. A woman veiled and all in black leads a man inside, money is wordlessly exchanged and they have sex. But it's the tension and drama of the scene that stays with us. She is tentative but determined, ashamed (perhaps?) but resolved to do what she must. The man is polite, then eager and then relentlessly rough as passion overcomes him. She is left in tears even as he yearns clearly to ask for another assignation. Nothing that comes after it can match this opening scene by the two leads.

Indeed, the more the play proceeds, the more it loses focus. The minor characters know who they are and are convincingly delivered. But Helena remains a mystery. Her relationship with her friend Mitzi and even the

delivery boy seems to waver from scene to scene, and not in an interesting way. Does Bela love her? Can he be trusted? Or will he tire of her once the allure of sleeping (for free) with a prostitute wears off?

It seems to be moving towards depicting a woman in mourning (though she is mourning her circumstances, not a husband she apparently married too soon and admired but didn't love). Slowly, this woman comes back to life thanks to a new lover, her disposition lightening just as her widow's weeds go from black to grey to white with the passage of time.

And yet, there's far more specificity in the costumes of Anita Yavich and the wigs and makeup of Tom Watson than the words of Grimm. Director Kate Whoriskey (the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Ruined*) can hardly be blamed for losing track of the emotions when the playwright did when writing it. That may be why the unchanging, secondary characters played by Chalfant and Benko and Goldsmith remain more vivid and enjoyable even as Helena and Bela become confusing.

SPOILER: Stop here if you are planning to see *Tales From Red Vienna* (and since it stars Arianda, I'd hardly be surprised if you were). But it's hard to discuss the show without tackling the second act. That involves a major plot twist. In a bizarre *deus ex machina*, Mitzi suddenly brings Helena's husband back from the grave in revenge for finding her boy toy sleeping with a friend she considers beneath herself. It turns out Karl (Lucas Hall) wasn't dead but just a deserter. After months under an assumed name in a hospital and then living overseas afraid to return, he's decided to show up and drag Helena off to a new life.

Hall makes no impression (beyond looking perfect for playing the younger brother to Matthew Morrison) because this is where Grimm goes completely off the rails. Even though Helena all but declared her love for Bela right before this shocking, soap-like revelation (and if she wasn't declaring her love, it's very poorly written), suddenly she doesn't know what she wants. Her husband is a dolt and a demanding one at that (when he calls her an adulterer, why does no one mention she could hardly be an adulterer when she believed her husband to be dead?).

But suddenly, Helena becomes self-actualized or something: she doesn't want her lover and she doesn't want her husband. ("I'm warning you for the last time!" she suddenly blurts out -- or something like that -- in a moment of passion, though we've missed when she was warning him before to go away or leave her alone or whatever it is she thinks she's warned him about.) Huh? If Grimm means to show a woman coming back to life and finding the inner strength to stand on her own two feet without the need of a lover she has outgrown or a husband she doesn't love (and who would?), well, he hasn't written that play. Not even close.

Arianda and Esper have chemistry but they're unable to maintain their fire when the actions of their characters fail to make any sense. Without any words, the elemental scene of two people in a room, people filled with desire and desperation and cynicism and despair can grip us. But tales should know where they're going and make sense in the end, even if they didn't make sense along the way. *Tales From Red Vienna* makes no sense at the end, even if talented actors keep us fitfully engaged while the teller strays further and further from his path.

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