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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer

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Theater: Yes, Nina Arianda Is All That In "Venus In Fur"

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VENUS IN FUR *** out of **** MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB AT SAMUEL J. FRIEDMAN

Actress Nina Arianda is the red-hot center of this new Broadway comedy, so let's start with playwright David Ives. Ives has worked steadily and often brilliantly since making his NYC debut in 1972 with *Canvas*. He reached a peak in the early 1990s with the popular string of one-acts *All In The Timing*. His work has been rich and varied: script doctoring, children's books, adaptations of the classics, original works, one acts, musicals and of course his welcome presence on the Encores! series of revivals.

But Ives has flowered in the last three years and reached new heights. His *New Jerusalem* -- an insightful drama about Spinoza -- was the best play of 2008 and will achieve the wide recognition it deserves when the right production comes along. *Venus In Fur* will forever be linked to the launching of Arianda's career (and will garner her another Tony nomination, without a doubt). It is the biggest hit in the [Classic Stage Company's](#) history (they've also been on fire with one very good show after another). And Ives recently premiered *The School For Lies* at CSC; it's his version of Moliere's *The Misanthrope* and it's absolutely dazzling. If we don't get to see that cast and that show again soon, it will be a travesty. (His adaptation *The Heir Apparent* in DC this September has received strong notices as well.) It's a notable run of consistent excellence for Ives.

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Still, it must be said that the two-hander *Venus In Fur* is the least of this batch. In it, Vonda (Arianda) arrives late for an audition, soaking wet, cursing up a storm and astoundingly wrong for the role Thomas (Hugh Dancy) is trying to cast. He's desperately seeking an actress who can play the sophisticated and witty young woman in a drama about sex and domination based on the classic German novel *Venus In Furs* by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. When you realize Sacher-Masoch gave masochism its name, you can imagine what sort of book it might be.

Vonda bulldozes Thomas into letting her audition and the fun begins. The ever-shifting power relationship between the two is dizzying: Vonda wants the part so the director Thomas has control over her. But the roles they're reading involve a man who is desperate to become the sex slave of a beautiful and sophisticated woman. Thomas is in an unhappy relationship but engaged to be married. Vonda teases and flirts and drives him to distraction. Her performance of the part is astounding yet when she dares to criticize a passage as degrading to women Thomas explodes and puts her back in her place. Back and forth, from script and audition to discussion and flirtation, past to present, master or mistress to slave -- it's a delight to watch these actors have such a blast with this conceit.

The emotional high point is a scene when Thomas is lying on a divan and Vonda is behind him like a therapist, quietly and devastatingly detailing his dull and unrewarding existence. This tamped-down man needs shaking up, waking up and we want Vonda to do it. But that's not exactly what the show intended, I think.

Hugh Dancy replaced Wes Bentley, who played Thomas in the *CSC* production. Dancy unquestionably delivers a more nuanced and interesting performance but in an odd way this does the play no good since it highlights some of the work's flaws. In Bentley's blunt, direct interpretation, Thomas is...how to put this?...a dick. Thomas is an unregenerate jerk who is dismissive of Vonda and women in general. He deserves, indeed demands his comeuppance. But with Dancy creating a fuller character, Thomas isn't so cut and dried. When Vonda criticizes a scene, Thomas lashes out at her, but this seems more like defensiveness over a weakness in his play, not the boorish behavior of a lout.

This leads us to the finale. Throughout the show, we've been asking, who is this woman? She comes in off the street squawking and chattering but in the blink of an eye embodies an upper-class woman from the late 1800s to perfection. She's off book (that is, performing the role without consulting the script) almost the entire time, even though she claims to have just glanced at the script on her way to the audition. Plus, she seems to know a disconcerting amount about Thomas and his private life. Four or five likely scenarios spring to mind but the show lands on by far the least interesting and satisfying one. It's a deflating climax that weakens everything that came before.

But don't let that stop you from going. Because what came before is Dancy dueling with Arianda and she is indeed a presence to be reckoned with. Arianda dominates the stage with the quicksilver changes called for. You want to burst into applause again and again throughout the show as she pulls off one marvelous turn after another. Bouncing in a chair across the stage in delight, curling her legs around Dancy, revealing layer and layer of intelligence and ferocity just as Vonda takes off layer and layer of clothing, Arianda is simply delightful. Even though you've been told again and again how remarkable she is, her



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work in *Venus In Fur* is good enough to overcome any cynicism or crossed-arms, show-me-what-you-got attitude that you might bring to the theater.

Director Walter Bobbie keeps the ever-changing moods of these two people crystal clear throughout. He might have convinced Ives to cut down on the rumbling thunder, which is quite unnecessary for goosing the drama. But the set by John Lee Beatty is spot-on in its specific anonymity and the costumes by Anita Yavich are wonderfully apt, pulling off that rare combination of humorous and sexy. I might complain that Ives did the equivalent of introducing a gun in the first act and not firing it in the third (surely at some point Dancy deserved a good spanking). But *Venus In Fur* is a triumph for Arianda and Dancy and a credit to Ives. Even in a work that goes astray in one crucial aspect, he's delivered an opportunity for some serious pleasure.

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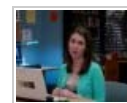
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Note: Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to this show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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