



BATTLE OF THE SEXES: (left to right) Hugh Dancy & the phenomenal Nina Arianda in the psycho-sexual thriller, *Venus in Fur*. Photo: Joan Marcus



Theater Review

Venus in Fur:

S&M power play, mind games

VENUS IN FUR

Written by David Ives

Directed by Walter Bobbie

Samuel J. Friedman Theatre

261 West 47th Street

(212-239-6200), www.ManhattanTheatreClub.com

By David NouNou

Control, power, dominance all play major factors in David Ives' provocative new dramedy, *Venus In Fur*. Who offers it and who uses it? Who ultimately has that power and control; the submissive who is giving you the power or the master who has been given that power? Until ultimately the lines become so blurred and, thus, the power struggle begins. Set in a rehearsal hall, Thomas (Hugh Dancy), a director and playwright, has auditioned some 35 actresses for the female lead in the play he has written, based on the classic 1870 erotic Austrian novella *Venus in Furs* by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (the namesake of the term "sadomasochism"). Not one of the actresses Thomas has auditioned has the qualities for which he is searching: beauty, grace, strength, power, and a great command of the English language.

As Thomas is calling it a day, and conversing with his girlfriend on his cell phone, in bursts Vanda (Nina Arianda), an actress, totally disheveled from the rainstorm outside, late for her audition, and the last person you would expect to qualify for the role. Dismissive he is, persistent she is, until finally he allows her to read three pages of the play just to appease her.

Thus begins the play within a play. Vanda has come prepared with all the accoutrements she feels the play demands, and Thomas is baffled but intrigued by her perceptions of the play. She gets into character immediately and thus, the start of role reversal begins. The actress becomes the master and the director begins to succumb to her desires. At least that is the way Thomas thinks he has written his play. The intrigue keeps building as Vanda refuses to play the master claiming she can't play this part, and Thomas keeps pushing the limits and forces her deeper into it. Ultimately revealing Thomas hasn't so much written a play about 19th century genteel characters who dabble into dominance and submission, but about himself and the desire to be totally subservient in every way possible.

What gives this play its *raison d'être* is the expert performances by its two leads: Nina Arianda and Hugh Dancy. Not having seen Ms. Arianda play this part in the 2010 Off-Broadway version, my first exposure to her was earlier this year as Billie Dawn in *Born Yesterday*. I was mesmerized by her performance in that show. She took an iconic role that was so identified for decades with Judy Holliday and, in one evening, reinvented the part and made it her own, I also felt she was robbed of the Tony Award. Needless to say, I was very highly anticipating what she would do next, and the part of Vanda is no exception. She enters as a disheveled bimbo and, magically in 90 minutes, transforms and exists as Venus divine. All I can say is Ms. Arianda has the talent and the range to be a formidable Broadway legend, and let's hope there are enough parts to keep her here and not be lured to Hollywood to do movies or worse yet get stuck in sitcoms.

Well, there certainly is no shortage of Hughs this season. We saw the legendary Hugh Jackman in his one-man show; now we have the dynamic Hugh Dancy. Although his role is not as flashy as Ms. Arianda's, he is in perfect harmony with her. He is a superb foil; you might say he is her straight man. It is always a slippery slope when you have a two-character play to sustain the viewer's interest, but through Walter Bobbie's expert direction, the action is always moving and never feels stilted. A word of warning should be issued at the onset of the play, "Beware of what inner fetishes you may possess for you may find them tonight."

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