

THE NATURAL

Nina Arianda: Broadway's new star.

BY JOHN LAHR



"She had other worlds in her," her teacher said. Photograph by Andreas Laszlo Konrath.

On September 21, 2009, three days after her twenty-fifth birthday, Nina Arianda, like most ambitious actresses just out of drama school, was making the rounds in New York, looking for work. In a large shoulder bag, she carried her C.V., which listed her graduate-school roles: Gwendolen in "The Importance of Being Earnest," Ana in "The Clean House," Maggie in "Hobson's Choice." The rest of her résumé consisted mostly of pro-bono acting jobs. (There are some ninety-five professional shows in New York every

year—and more than eight thousand actresses registered with Actors Equity; the math tells its own dismal story.) For a couple of months after getting her M.F.A. from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, Arianda, who is trim, blond, and distinctly Slavic-looking, had taken a hostess job at the East Side French restaurant Orsay, which left her time during the day to hustle for parts. She had just auditioned for a show that was being staged in Baltimore. Now she was on her way to Pearl Studios, on Eighth Avenue, to try

out for an Off Broadway production of a new play by David Ives, "Venus in Fur," the story of a fierce and funny psychosexual power struggle between an actress and her director. Arianda had fallen in love with the heroine of the play, Vanda, an aspiring actress, who—in a scenario familiar to Arianda—arrives at a rehearsal hall to audition for a part she has no chance of getting. In Vanda's case, it was a part in an adaptation of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's classic about the erotic forms of hate, "Venus in Furs." "Am I too late? I'm too late, right? Fuck. *Fuck!*" Vanda says as she arrives onstage, hoping to read for the role of Vanda von Dunayev, an emancipated nineteenth-century Continental woman. The dramatic pitch of Vanda's opening line captured Arianda's imagination. "I'd never read something and been so enthralled by where a character could go," she told me recently. "The humor is what always gets me. The commitment she has to what she's doing or saying. There's no comment. She lives it."

The actress who plays Vanda is required to metamorphose from a twenty-first-century street-smart New Yorker into the nineteenth-century European cosmopolitan of the Sacher-Masoch play-within-the-play, and even have the emotional extravagance to suggest the goddess Aphrodite, who emerges as a sort of fabulous eleven-o'clock number. In other words, the creative team for "Venus in Fur" were looking for a cross between Barbara Harris and Zoe Caldwell. The combination of contemporary and classical performing styles demanded a flexibility that had escaped all the actresses, many of them well known, who auditioned during a frustrating six-month search. "We were at our wit's end," Ives recalled. "We had the equivalent of a cat-tle call."

For about ten days before the audition, Arianda had submerged herself in Vanda, a rigorous and intuitive exploration that was more visceral than intellectual. She thought, she said, about "how my back straightens out for Vanda, how my feet feel. I don't see her. I just feel her." Her awareness that she was extremely unlikely to get the job had a counterintuitive effect: she decided to let go and have fun with it. "I just didn't care," she said. "I didn't care about anyone's opinion." Arianda had been sent to the audition by the veteran casting director James Calleri, whose asso-

ciates had seen her that February in her N.Y.U. production of “The Importance of Being Earnest.” They had been so insistent that Calleri had e-mailed her the next day and asked her to come into the office. “We don’t do that very often,” he said. To Calleri’s eye, Arianda “was just remarkable. She had a really, really strong point of view—confident, sexy, maybe a little insecure, which is like a great vulnerability. She doesn’t look like all the other girls in the class.” Arianda, whose parents were born to Ukrainian refugees in Germany after the Second World War, didn’t talk like them, either. “I don’t want to be the third Ukrainian hooker on the left,” she told Calleri. “I can do something more.” He gave Arianda his business card. “You have fans at Calleri Casting,” he said. In the elevator, she wrote his words on the back of the card and put it in her wallet to read whenever she needed a boost.

The script of “Venus in Fur” called for Vanda to strip to her bra and panties. Arianda judged this inappropriate for the audition, but she didn’t want just to mime the action, so she bought a pair of opaque black tights and a bustier. She also found

a suitable scent for Vanda. “Perfume is a big thing for me,” she said. “I have to smell right. It has to smell like her.” When she arrived for the audition, two actresses were there ahead of her. She tried to hear whether they were doing two or three pages from the script, the last of which contained several lines in Greek. She had deputized her uncle to ask the Greek teachers at her younger cousin’s high school to translate and phonetically break down the words for her. When her name was called, she was still reviewing the syllables she’d written in the margin of her script.

Just before Arianda walked into the room, her résumé was passed to Brian Kulick, the artistic director of the Classic Stage Company, who was planning to produce the play. Next to Kulick at the table were David Ives and the director Walter Bobbie, as well as Calleri and an associate, Paul Davis. Kulick glanced down at Arianda’s lean C.V. “I’m gonna kill James,” he said to Ives. “This is a waste of my time.” Arianda entered the audition room with her bag of props, just as Vanda does in the script, and performed the first

seven minutes of the play. “She didn’t just read the lines as a character,” Bobbie recalled. “She brought the entire script to life.” For the creative team, the greatest astonishment was the spontaneity and ease with which Arianda moved from vulgar American to louche European, blurring the boundaries between past and present, between the play and the play-within-the-play, in a way that made the sparring between Vanda and the director, Thomas, alternately hilarious and chilling. In the middle of the audition, Bobbie stopped Arianda and made a suggestion. “He said, ‘You’re not seducing him. You have to make him come to you,’” Ives recalled. Arianda replied, “O.K., I’ll do that,” and then she did. Ives said, “That is a very hard distinction to make, but it was instantly there.”

Bobbie wanted to stop the auditions immediately. “She showed me how the play worked,” he said. “I was afraid someone would cast her by the end of the day. It was that breathtaking an audition. I don’t know how to explain it. But when the real thing walks in the room you know it.” On her audition sheet, below where Paul Davis had written “Bold. Sexy. Funny,” Calleri scribbled “STW”—Straight to Wardrobe.

When “Venus in Fur” opened at the Classic Stage Company, on Thirteenth Street, in January, 2010, news of Arianda’s performance rippled through the theatrical community. The play, which was extended twice, became the longest-running show in the C.S.C.’s forty-year history, and a Broadway transfer was planned. (The Broadway production opens on November 8th, at the Samuel J. Friedman.) “We had a lot of repeat business. People kept coming back to see Nina again,” Kulick said. “Very, very rare,” the director Mike Nichols, who saw the show twice, said of her performance. As comparisons, “I can think of Judy Holliday and Meryl Streep. They were a tremendous shock the first time they were seen in a play.” Arianda, like Holliday, he added, was “a funny girl who could act her ass off.” Other directors agreed. Woody Allen hired her for a cameo in his movie “Midnight in Paris,” then regretted not having a larger part for her. Doug Hughes, who had directed “Doubt” and “Oleanna” on Broadway, likened his first sighting of Arianda to



“what it must have been like to walk into the Lion and see Barbra Streisand in 1960—the three-octave range with no discernible break. Somebody who was that young, who clearly felt no need to wait her turn. There was so much fire coupled with so much technique.”

Hughes, who had been struggling to cast a revival of Garson Kanin’s “Born Yesterday,” was convinced that he had stumbled onto his answer. He told himself, “We’re never, ever gonna see anybody who could take that role out around the park the way Nina Arianda can. We won’t see anybody who will go at it as ferociously.” Arianda made her Broadway debut in April, 2011, as “Born Yesterday”’s bimbo-turned-bookworm, Billie Dawn, in a performance full of sinew and sass, which earned her a Tony nomination for Best Actress.

Arianda, who uses her middle name instead of her Ukrainian surname, Matijcio, first appeared onstage at age three, reciting part of a patriotic Ukrainian poem at a Ukrainian school hall in Passaic, New Jersey. (She grew up in Clifton.) She had spent the previous week learning the poem with her mother, Lesia, a painter who had studied at the School of Visual Arts with Robert De Niro, Sr., and who taught English as a Second Language. (Her father, Peter, is a logistics expert for the Department of Defense.) “Nina had interpretive powers very young,” Lesia told me. “I would explain everything to her. She had an uncanny ability to remember and say it, not in rote but with a certain personal interpretation.” Arianda recalled, “Either it was the cuteness or the delivery—I got crazy applause. So I curtsied. I’ve got grannies and grandpas crying in the second row, so now I’m going nuts with it. Now the skirt’s a little higher. By the end, my skirt was almost above my head. I’m still just loving the fact that they loved what I did. That was it.”

Arianda grew up an only child in a stimulating, optimistic, and tight-knit family. “We love hard, we fight hard,” she says of her parents. Thanks to them, her bond to Ukrainian culture is also strong. She took First Communion in the St. Nicholas Ukrainian Catholic Church, was a Ukrainian Girl Scout, went to Ukrainian summer camp, and still speaks Ukrainian with her family. “I don’t really

know what ‘American’ is,” she said. “I know what Ukrainian is. We’re happy Slavic people. We’re not Dostoyevsky Slavic people. There’s this sense of pick it up, get your hands dirty, make the best of it, celebrate.”

When the Soviet Union was breaking up, Arianda’s parents wrote to President George H.W. Bush, asking him to encourage Ukrainian democracy. Under separate cover, Arianda sent her own letter, with a drawing of the American and the Ukrainian flags. Bush didn’t write back to her parents, but he did send a reply to Arianda. In fourth grade, Arianda wrote another letter, beseeching President Clinton to push the G-7 to give financial aid to Ukraine. Ukraine didn’t get the financial help it sought; she didn’t get a reply. Devastated on both counts, she wrote directly to Leonid Kravchuk, the President of Ukraine. “I very much love Ukraine and I want to help her,” she said in a letter that was later quoted in the Ukrainian press. Not only did she get a reply; she got an invitation to Ukraine to meet with the President. Over Thanksgiving, she travelled with her parents to Kiev, where, at age nine, she was received by President Kravchuk. One newspaper account noted that “she looked rather tired,” but she “came alive” when she visited a school in Chernigov, where she made dumplings, attended a concert, and danced with Ukrainian children.

As a child, Arianda could sing both the male and the female arias of “Rigoletto,” which her parents listened to, she said, “all day every day.” She was obsessed with “Carmen,” and she loved to play dress-up. “Every day was constantly filled with make-believe,” she said. She and her mother regularly used the best tablecloth to sit down to tea with her dolls. “We never had a boring day,” Lesia recalled. At the age of six, Arianda was taken to “Les Misérables,” her first Broadway show. To prepare her for it, Lesia made paper dolls of all the main characters, and together they acted out the story and listened to the music. After the show, Arianda was given a backstage tour by one of her early theatre teachers, who was a member of the cast. “It was like Narnia to me,” she said. When she was allowed to walk onstage, “everything just clicked,”

she told me. “The ghosts. The history. Everything that lives in this world which is theatre: acting, that community, that mind space. I wanted that so bad.”

Arianda calls herself an “old soul.” “I never felt my age,” she said. As such, she was something of a misfit in school. To American kids, she must have seemed completely other: tall, foreign, uninterested in sports, and, by the age of nine, dedicated to becoming a professional actress. One day, when she was in fifth grade at St. John the Baptist Ukraini, in Newark, she was taken out of class to be driven to New York for an audition. “The teacher turned to me, and goes, ‘You really think something’s gonna come of this? You’re wasting your time,’” Arianda said. “The whole class laughed. I kind of crumbled.”

For a couple of years, her parents shuttled her to and from auditions. “When I became ambitious, they became ambitious,” she said. She got some voice-over work but no acting parts. According to her agent, she was “too ethnic-looking.” From that point on, Arianda attended acting classes, including an advanced program at the Herbert Berghof Studio, where her parents lied about her age to get her in.

She attended the Professional Performing Arts High School in New York for one semester before moving with her family to Heidelberg, Germany, where her father was posted. She wanted to stay in Europe for her university education, but after being rejected by England’s Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and by the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art she returned to the United States alone, at the age of seventeen. Arianda’s winding educational road took her from the American Musical and Dramatic Academy to the New School, and finally to N.Y.U., where she was chosen for a class of eighteen—out of a field of eight hundred—in the graduate acting program.

The first couple of months were a strain for Arianda, who struggled to let her guard down. “I never had brothers and sisters,” she said. “All of a sudden, I had seventeen of them.” To Janet Zarish, who taught her in her second and third years, Arianda seemed “exotic in some way, like she had other worlds in her.” Zarish com-



compares the “buzz” inside Arianda to “molecules crashing around.” “She has a sort of creative restlessness,” she told me. “Underneath is this cauldron of feeling.” She added, “She has something always moving through her mind and her body. I almost feel like acting for her organizes something inside herself.”

One evening in mid-September, the day after she turned twenty-seven, Arianda and I met for a late dinner. She had just finished the first day of rehearsals for the Broadway production of “Venus in Fur,” with Hugh Dancy, her new leading man. (Wes Bentley had played Thomas in the Classic Stage Company’s production.) “It felt almost like doing it for the first time again,” she said. Her excitement made her luminous. Depending on her emotions at any given moment, Arianda can look gorgeous or ordinary. It’s a decision. “It doesn’t have to do with special makeup,” Mike Nichols, who has used her twice in readings, said. “It’s what a great stage beauty is. She can become beautiful anytime she wants.”

At dinner, Arianda was still ruminating over the day’s discoveries. The adjustment from the American Bentley to Dancy, an Oxford-educated Brit, was like “going from a guitar to a piano,” she said. She was thinking about the effect on her of a line from the play-within-the-play, where Thomas kneels before Dunayev, the object of his perverse desire. “We have had enough of this game, haven’t we?” he says. “I played my part better than you ever expected, didn’t I? I did all this to save you. To show you how much I loved you. To cure you.” Arianda recalled, “The way Hugh said ‘cure,’ I just started tearing up. I don’t know why. He made me feel as though I had some kind of illness, that something was really wrong with me. He was so passionate. I’ve never heard it before like that.”

Onstage and off, swiftness is a defining part of Arianda’s personality. Dancy’s line reading had shifted her notion of the character and sent her charging down another intellectual path. “We walk around with such strong convictions about who we are,” she said. “Then, somehow, something catches us off guard, and everything you thought you knew about yourself dwindles and is gone. I think there’s a lot of that in the play. I don’t know where yet, but I sense that that’s something I really

want to investigate.” Later, Arianda pulled out her script and flicked through it. “I love this line. ‘Strong feelings will throw off the strictest meter,’” she said. “It kind of speaks to me. I love that feelings would throw off something so technically driven.”

Acting is where Arianda allows herself to be vulnerable. She learns about her own emotions and about her range as a person by disappearing into a character’s psyche. “Venus in Fur,” she said, had allowed her to explore “white rage—where everything goes white and you almost lose control of your body.” She explained, “I get to go home, but that lives inside of me somewhere. You’re capable of doing serious damage.”

“Born Yesterday” taught her something even more unsettling. Her character, Billie Dawn, the ditzzy showgirl mistress of a corrupt businessman, who gets an education in the course of the play, was first defined by Judy Holliday, onstage in 1946 and then in an Oscar-winning film performance in 1950. Arianda, who never saw the movie, brought a sexier and distinctly feminist reading to the role. Her Billie Dawn was more broad than kook, a kept woman who traded sexuality for safety, who didn’t believe that she could be loved for her underutilized mind, rather than for her overused body. The most startling stroke that Arianda brought to her reinvention of the malaprop-prone blonde was to see her as uneducated but not stupid. “I never approach a character from a negative place,” she said. “Being stupid is not active. I thought she was incredibly smart, in a way. That was a far more interesting thing to play.” She added, “The vulnerability that Billie had is something that I invited into my life, more than I would have before the play.” As she picked at her food, she suddenly looked plain. “I think if you want to get to know me,” she suggested, “you should come and see a show. A person might get to see more sides of me.”

In the gloom of a late-night tech rehearsal, while Bobbie slumped in his seat beside the director’s table and the lighting designer clambered onto the balcony railing to adjust a klieg light, Arianda, in a long white crinoline and high-heeled leather boots, stretched out on the rust-colored chaise longue. In the half-light, the proscenium glowed like a bright department-store window, which shadowy people behind it were dressing. Arianda was

practicing her pratfalls, suddenly throwing herself onto the floor and testing how her arm looked when raised in various gestures from behind the chair. "It's amazing what a rake will do," she called out to Bobbie. Off Broadway, "Venus" was performed on a platform in a vast semicircular space, so that the audience had to imagine the rehearsal room in which the action takes place. At the Samuel J. Friedman, the rehearsal room—walls, ceiling, bank of industrial neon lights above—had been built. Inevitably, with the change of space and of male star, the staging of the play had to be re-imagined. In the scene that Arianda and Dancy were working on—in which the eager Vanda begs the wary Thomas to let her have a shot at the part—the actors were blocking a new trajectory, which began upstage and ended at the chaise longue, where Vanda suddenly transforms herself into Dunayev. First, Vanda tried to convince Thomas that he needed to add a part for Venus in his script:

VANDA: You could even have the same actress play 'em both. I'll do it. Naked on-stage? Fuck. I'll take a freebie.

THOMAS: I'll think about it.

VANDA: Why? We can improv it. Maybe you'll get some ideas. O.K., I'm Venus now.

Arianda kicked off her crinoline. In black bustier, garter belt, and high-heeled boots, she stood statuesque and freezing, a goosepimpled dominatrix. Dancy, an English gent, took off his character's green-velvet Edwardian long coat and draped it around her shoulders. They went on:

VANDA: Imagine me totally naked.

THOMAS: You're not coming on to me now, are you, Vanda?

VANDA: Come on, you're a big boy. Just think of me as Fiancée and improvise.

When they got to the chaise longue, Arianda spent a long time playing with the heavy piece of furniture, at first leaning against it like a cat on a scratching pole, then kicking and pushing the cumbersome prop until it was properly angled. When Bobbie paused to check the color of light on the ceiling, Arianda sat back on the sofa, legs splayed, singing to herself. Stagehands shuffled furniture, electricians checked wiring, Dancy worked his lines. Throughout the tedious hubbub, while they waited to begin again, Arianda sang and danced in her chair, her body never losing its thrum of joy.

When she and Dancy got back to work, they began in the middle of the sa-



"Personally, I think this country was in trouble when we decided to make sliced bread the high-water mark."

domasochistic game of the play-within-the-play, with Thomas behind the chaise, refusing to bend to the will of Dunayev, at the foot:

VANDA: You dare to resist me?

THOMAS: Yes, I dare.

VANDA: You little piece of nothing! You dust! You dare to resist a goddess?

Arianda began her progress up the chaise longue. For the next ten minutes, she turned the piece of furniture into a laboratory for various dramatic ideas. First she bounced toward Dancy, then she crawled on her knees; she tried slithering toward him and throwing herself over the back of the sofa, readjusting the length of her body to calibrate the comic effect of the outline. As the mind-numbing tech rehearsal rolled on, from my perspective in the orchestra the proscenium blurred and became a kind of silent screen on which the players signalled their meaning through gesture and mime. Arianda seemed to like the foxhole camaraderie of it all; she never lost her focus or her spirits. She worked her script like a musician looking at a sheet of music, calculating which of many ways to go. Although at home her genres of choice are rock, hip-hop, and opera, the music she was making onstage was all jazz.

"She listens extraordinarily well," Bobbie said of Arianda's acting. Not surprisingly, she abhors actors who don't listen—who do what she calls "masturbatory acting." "I believe in

magic," she said. Actors who don't listen aren't "serving the magic—there is no play. There is no story. There is no character. They just get into their own wonder. Hate watching that. It's pointless." By her own admission, Arianda is superstitious. "I believe it's good to give things a certain ritual power, because it takes it off yourself," she said. For "Born Yesterday," she instilled that power into the pre-show music (the Andrews Sisters), her perfume (Juicy Couture, and a mixture of fresh-cut grass and honeydew-melon essence—"very split and confused," like Billie), and a routine exchange with her dresser. "Are they there?" the dresser would ask. Arianda would peep quickly through the curtain. "Yes, they are," she'd say, then they'd exchange three kisses.

Arianda has certain rituals for "Venus in Fur," too, but she won't disclose them for fear of losing her mojo. One routine never varies, though. Arianda arrives early every night and spends some time on the stage by herself, partly to inhabit the universe of the play, partly to commune with the theatre's ancestors. "Everyone who was on that stage is there," she told me. "You leave part of yourself on every stage you're on. How could you not live in the air somehow?" She went on, "There is a great comfort in knowing there is something bigger. That gives me a great deal of surrender." ♦