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## Theater Review: Elderly mother scandalizes daughter in 'Venus Rising'

By Jim Lowe Staff Writer Feb 3, 2019

WHITE RIVER JUNCTION – Marisa Smith’s “Venus Rising” is a delightful new comedy about an adult mother-daughter relationship that gently – and often hilariously – tackles much deeper issues.

Northern Stage opened the world premiere production of “Venus Rising,” Saturday at its Barrette Center for the Arts, that was almost as touching as it was funny – thanks to finely crafted writing by the Hanover, N.H. playwright and an excellent cast.

When 40-something Julie unexpectedly arrives at her mother Cora’s home, it’s not just to visit. She’s leaving her doctor-husband and moving in. The problem is now Cora has a life and Julie doesn’t. And that’s just the beginning.

Julie is immediately upset about Cora’s housekeeping, her diet and lifestyle, but mostly that her elderly mother has a boyfriend – and worse yet, they have sex!



*Julie (Laurel Casillo) confronts her mother Cora (Diane J. Findlay) about her dinking habits in Northern Stage’s world premiere production of “Venus Rising.”*

Julie’s real problem isn’t Cora, it’s herself. During her marriage she has lost herself, and in order to avoid dealing with that, she focuses on Cora’s life. It takes Cora’s health crisis, exacerbated by Julie, the wisdom of Julie’s estranged alcoholic friend Grace, and

the gentle caring of her mother's lover Winslow for Julie to finally embrace her mother – and herself.

Despite the seriousness of this description, the journey is great fun. Smith's characters are an irresistible mix of comic timing and human depth. And the story deals realistically with relationships, aging, drugs and more. Despite a final scene that seems added it on, "Venus Rising" was a real pleasure.

The Northern Stage production, ably directed by Jess Chayes, enjoyed all those qualities. Laurel Casillo effectively delivered Julie's self-righteousness masking her deep fears, managing to be funny at the same time. As Cora, Diane J. Findlay conversely and delightfully created a character whose irresistible humor masks her depth of caring.

Kenneth Kimmins, an actor familiar for his performances at Saint Michael's Playhouse in Colchester and on TV, made Winslow sensitive, caring and funny. Laurie Wells gave a feeling of authenticity to the just-out-of-rehab Grace, as well as a touching and very funny performance.

That said, the opening night production tried a little too hard. This is a very well crafted comedy that works smoothly and easily, and didn't need any comic pushes. Still, it was very, very funny,

The physical production met Northern Stage's usual high standards. Reid Thompson's dramatically framed set was realistic and homey, Barbara Bell's costumes authentic and evocative, effectively lit by Jennifer Reiser, with an attractive sound design by Ben Montmagny.

Marisa Smith's "Venus Rising" is a comedy whose irresistible banter mixes with real human relationships, and Northern Stage's production delivered delightfully.

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