

# THE YIN AND YANG OF VANESSA MARCIL

The irresistible VIP host on NBC's *Las Vegas* reveals why she is more tomboy than glamour diva and dishes about the new season's intense story line

BY E.C. GLADSTONE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GIULIANO BEKOR

**M**ost actresses would not want to be seen like this. Standing in front of me is a diminutive creature who looks like an exotic sci-fi alien, her head bubbled out by multicolored curlers, with bright white pads stuck on her cheekbones and false eyelashes tipped with tiny globes.

"Hi, I'm Vanessa."

This is Vanessa Marcil? The irresistible VIP host on NBC's *Las Vegas*? The woman who's been on "most beautiful/hot" lists year after year? The one Prince cast in his "The Most Beautiful Girl in the World" video?

We are in Hollywood's Lightbox Studio for the photo shoot you see on these pages, with photographer Giuliano Bekor and his crew. It's always fun to get a glimpse behind the scenes to see how the magic is made, and today does not disappoint. In fact, what you don't see in the pictures—a hair stylist, a makeup artist and a fashion stylist with a rack full of couture primping our girl to perfection—is enough to make anyone look amazing, even today.

"I have the flu," Vanessa announces apologetically. "I feel like I'm going to die."

Nevertheless, once the hair comes down and the strange stuff is taken off her face, Marcil is still





Black-on-black silk polka-dot dress by **Rebellion Dogs** available at Rebellion Dogs, Los Angeles. White-and-yellow-gold bangles by **Cartier** available at Cartier, Wynn Las Vegas. Cuff bracelet by **Ana Reign** available at H. Lorenzo, Los Angeles.

## VANESSA MARCIL

uncommonly alluring in jeans, a belly-baring T-shirt, Air Jordans and two Cartier lock bracelets. Not to mention sharp as a tack.

"I like people who are kind of tragic," she says, sizing me up with a smile that is half Mona Lisa and half Cheshire cat. "I hate boring people who have their shit together."

Vanessa uses unlikely words such as "tomboy" and "dork" to describe herself, preferring gadgets (her entire house is wired to remote) and gears (she races a Ducati Monster 695 motorbike and a '74 Ferrari Dino sports car) to glamour. "I am a supertough chick," she says, but still "so vulnerable that I cry during coffee commercials." She is also obsessed with athletes, particularly of the daredevil variety, and likes to face down her own fears. But she's equally intellectual, currently reading Philip Roth and Neale Donald Walsch. "It really is my favorite thing to be around people who are smarter than me and funnier than me."

That, Marcil says, makes her virtually the exact opposite of almost every character she's played, including Brenda Barrett on *General Hospital* and *Beverly Hills 90210*'s Gina Kincaid, but there are definitely some parallels between Vanessa and the Montecito Casino's Sam Marquez.

"My character doesn't give a shit what anyone thinks about her," Marcil explains. "She's a badass." Yet Sam is ruthlessly ambitious and Vanessa is just the opposite, she says. "Everything in my life goes better when I'm not obsessed with it."

Take, for example, the start of her career. Vanessa had been doing local theater since age five but never intended to turn pro, even after moving to Southern California.

As Marcil recalls, she was doing a small summer production waiting for law-school classes to start when a talent manager in the audience offered to get her auditions. Despite being so broke that she was sneaking in and out of her apartment even as she inched perilously closer to eviction and living on potatoes and Top Ramen noodles, Marcil declined. But the manager persisted, and Vanessa finally allowed her to take Polaroids and attach them to fake résumés. In about a week, she had the *General Hospital* offer.

"I loved *General Hospital*," Marcil raves of her time on the daytime drama. "I loved my character. Antonio Sabato, Jr., and I rode his motorcycle to the prom."

That's not to slight *Las Vegas*, which, Marcil says, is still as fun to make as you'd imagine, even after four years. She sings the professional and personal praises of her cast mates, particularly Molly Sims, with whom she commiserates over man troubles, and Nikki Cox, Josh Duhamel and James Caan, of whom she's an unabashed fan (she's seen *The Godfather* 49 times).

"Vanessa is like a female Jimmy Caan, very bold, very comfortably confident," Duhamel had told me earlier. "You've got to really keep up with her because you never know what she's going to do."

And here's the part where I suggest you sit down: Marcil is 38—and a mom. She says she hasn't worked out once since her four-year-old son, Kassius, was born. And up close, on a bad day, she looks at least 10 years younger. She probably still gets carded.

Marcil can quickly turn philosophical ("I'm respectful of anything anyone believes in that causes them to try to be a better person," she says about religion), then just as quickly sling out the most biting comment imaginable. "I would literally rather get a pap smear than have my picture taken," Vanessa confides while trying to choose a dress. But she is no whiner, either, asking only that the music be switched up for inspiration as Giuliano shoots some preliminaries and enlisting yours truly to play DJ. A mix of Ciara, Al Green, De La Soul and The Doors seems to put her in the right mood.

As lunch break is called, Vanessa changes back into her jeans, puts on her glasses, grabs a healthy plate of chicken and ravioli and sits on the concrete floor like a college kid. "It's all character study and theater," Vanessa says of her glam-

orous side. "It's not me in my real life, not at all." And despite a mouth that could stop a trucker in his tracks, Marcil claims to be fairly conservative, even prudish. "People assume that I'm more of a sexpot than I am."

In fact, Vanessa says she's turned down repeated offers to pose for *Playboy* and resisted wearing even a bathing suit on *GH* despite her character losing her virginity in one prominent plot line. She says she only gave in to men's magazines—*Maxim*, *Stuff* and *FHM*—after having her baby.

"Something changed about the way I thought about my body," she says. "I just thought it was hot to be curvy and eat whatever I wanted and not be obsessed. I became a much happier, much funnier person to hang out with. And I felt much sexier."

For someone who has pretty successfully shunned the spotlight and who loathes gossip, in print or otherwise, Vanessa has certainly led an interesting life. She says her childhood in dusty Indio, California, which is east of Palm Springs, was so dire that "if I became anything but a crack whore it was a victory." She's joking, but just barely.

"We just grew up with nothing," she says, remembering that her mom didn't even have a car in the remote desert town and had to walk everywhere with Vanessa and her three older kids. "Indio was our whole world." (The family also briefly lived in Anchorage, Alaska, among other places.)

Vanessa went through a self-described rebellious period in high school, including shaving her head into a Mohawk and ditching classes enough to get picked up by the police and sent to "probation school" for a year. She apparently got the message, still managing to graduate early, and soon after legally changed her surname from Ortiz to her mother's maiden name, Marcil.

Her father, Peter, a contractor, is an alcoholic, and though Vanessa avoids going into any details, she says that was the motivation for her long-standing work with Sojourn Services, a nonprofit family-services organization. "I wanted to get involved with young girls who'd grown up around domestic violence," she says. Her mother, Patricia, on the other hand, was a source of constant support and today lives with Marcil and their silky terrier, Joey, helping care for Kassius.

Vanessa moved out at 17 but clearly still had some growing up to do. In the heady days of her first acting success, Marcil admits she overindulged in alcohol and ended up getting hitched to 1980s teen idol Corey Feldman (*The Lost Boys*) in a classic Vegas quickie wedding. It's an incident she doesn't want to talk about, saying only, "I did a lot of silly stuff when I was a drunk teenager, none of which holds any weight." That goes for her tattoos, as well—a delicate anklet and a large symbol on the small of her back. "It's supposed to be the Egyptian symbol for 'love and peace in the universe,' but really it just means '18 and drunk.'" The marriage was officially annulled after two years, and the tattoos are about to be erased as well.

"On my 19th birthday I decided to write out a list of goals, and I promised myself I wouldn't put anything impure in my body until I achieved every single goal on the list," she recalls. "It took me 12 years. The last one was about me forgiving my father."

Today, "I don't have any vices. I'm the biggest lightweight in the world," she admits with a laugh.

On this last week of shooting *Las Vegas*' fourth season, Vanessa admits it's up in the air whether the show will return in the fall, though the intensity of her final scenes would make it the ultimate cliffhanger ending if it doesn't (let's just say a lot of duct tape was involved and she got a nasty rug burn on her shoulder).

Whenever *Las Vegas* ends, Vanessa hopes to have her own semiautobiographical project ready for prime time. In the meantime, Marcil is off to New York to do theater. "I'll act anywhere," she says. "It doesn't really matter to me if it's

Despite a mouth that could stop a trucker in his tracks, Marcil claims to be fairly conservative, even prudish. "People assume that I'm more of a sexpot than I am."

Sheer halter top by **Tang'O by Marina Babini** available at [marinababini.it](http://marinababini.it). Silk gown worn as a skirt by **Deanzign** available at [deanzign.com](http://deanzign.com). Sterling-silver necklace with black onyx and pearls by **Ana Reign Designs** available at H. Lorenzo, Los Angeles. Sheer tights by **Frederick's of Hollywood** available at Frederick's of Hollywood, Fashion Show mall.



## VANESSA MARCIL

daytime or prime time or a theater that seats five people."

And yet, in what amounts to Hollywood heresy, Marcil confesses, "I definitely am more interested in my real life than my job." The lack of more prominent projects outside of her TV roles has another reason; the offers that have come her way—"guy's girlfriend who takes her top off" as she puts it—aren't worth being separated from Kassius.

"Her son is always on the set," Duhamel says. "You see what her priorities are."

Despite being linked to Prince, *GH*'s Tyler Christopher, Jeremy Piven, *90210*'s Brian Austin Green (who fathered Kassius and remains a doting dad) and most recently writer/director Ben Younger, Marcil insists she has never wanted to get married, though she would love to have more children.

Vanessa also loves to travel, whether it's to the real Vegas (she's a huge fan of Simon, Nobu and everything else at the Hard Rock), Australia or tiny Narrowsburg, New York. Even at her Hollywood Hills home, Marcil tends to live out of suitcases. Still, she says spending a weekend in bed is "the greatest vacation in the world."

Last year, at the personal suggestion of Oprah, the actress visited Nkosi's Haven, an orphanage in Johannesburg that takes in HIV-positive mothers and their children. Marcil had made many of Kassius' baby clothes and decided to return to the sewing machine to make clothes for the orphans. She now plans a retail line of kids' clothes to subsidize them.

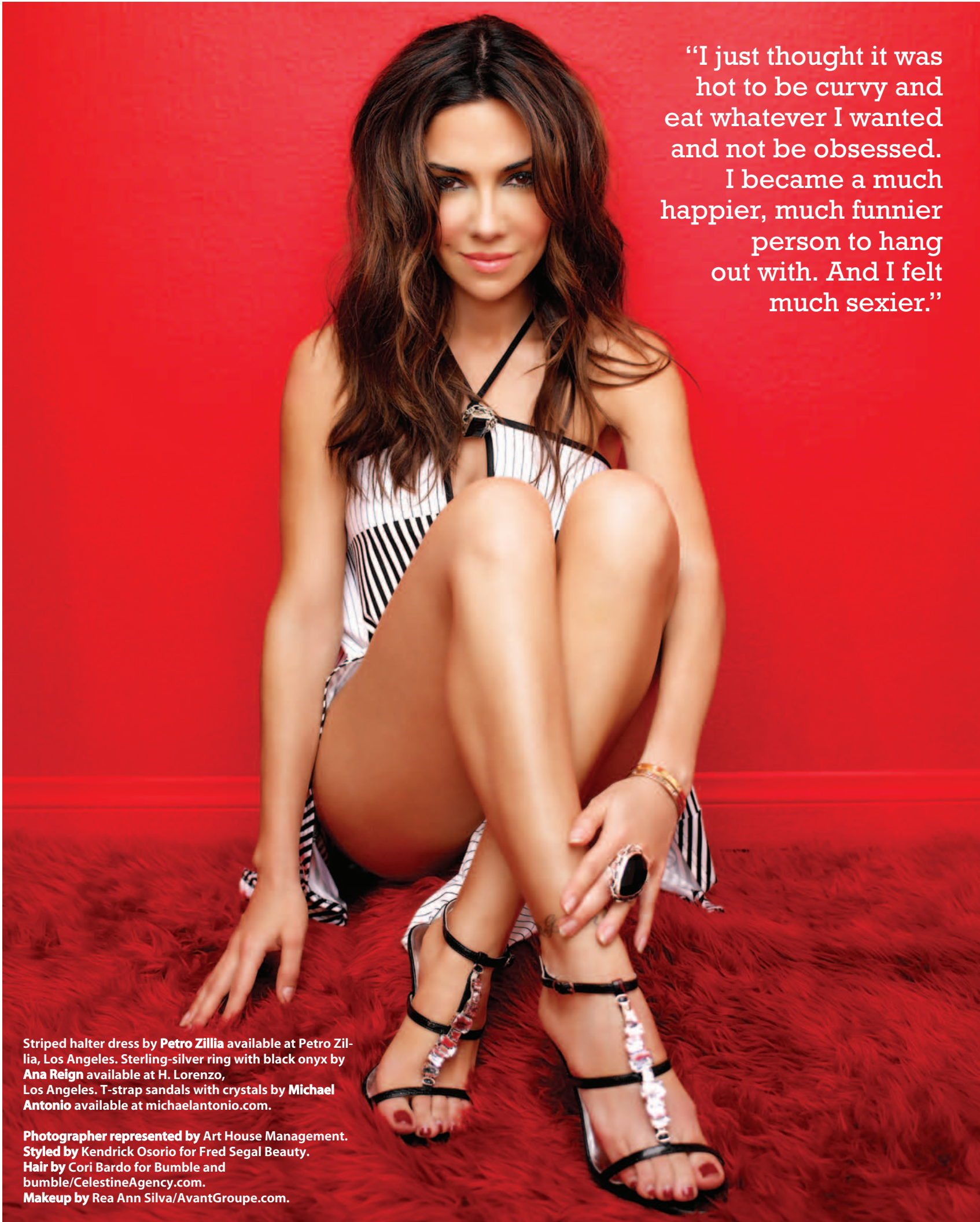
"I love exactly where I am," Vanessa sums up, her flu and photo fears temporarily forgotten. "I have a really beautiful life doing something that I love."

Finally, after all the primping and prodding and drinking hot tea through a straw and answering distracting questions, Bekor holds up a hand. "Enough," he says. "You people have had her all day. Now she's mine."

And it's magic time. ♠



Strapless tulle dress by **Lorel Miss** available at [lorelmiss.com](http://lorelmiss.com). Cork wedge sandals by **Jimmy Choo** available at Jimmy Choo, The Forum Shops at Caesars.



“I just thought it was hot to be curvy and eat whatever I wanted and not be obsessed. I became a much happier, much funnier person to hang out with. And I felt much sexier.”

Striped halter dress by **Petro Zilia** available at Petro Zilia, Los Angeles. Sterling-silver ring with black onyx by **Ana Reign** available at H. Lorenzo, Los Angeles. T-strap sandals with crystals by **Michael Antonio** available at michaelantonio.com.

Photographer represented by Art House Management. Styled by Kendrick Osorio for Fred Segal Beauty. Hair by Cori Bardo for Bumble and bumble/CelestineAgency.com. Makeup by Rea Ann Silva/AvantGroupe.com.