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Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike: A Great Comedy Well Performed by 4th Wall Theatre Co.

[D. L. Groover](#) November 23, 2024 | 6:16AM



Kim Tobin-Lehl and David Gow in *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike* at 4th Wall Theatre Co. **Photo by Gabriella Nissen**

In years to come, I predict Christopher Durang's rueful yet screamingly funny ***Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike***, in a splendidly forceful production from 4th Wall Theatre Company, will be viewed as a masterpiece. I'm borrowing from housekeeper Casandra here, without her clairvoyant voodoo powers. It has charm and wit, a wicked gentleness unlike his other off-kilter plays *Betty's Summer Vacation*, *The Marriage of Betty and Boo*, or *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains it All to You*. It has a tender heart while it slays you with subtle gay sensibility. It makes you laugh, then suddenly startles, then zings with an acid retort, then basks in autumnal regret. It has everything one wants.

Taking off from master dramatist Chekhov, Durang flies high indeed. Like an aviator of yore, he swoops through the barn, performs loop-de-loops, catches your breath with his aerial feats, and then makes a perfect landing. *Vanya's* a master class in structure, while scating through and around the great Russian playwright. His characters, like

Chekhov's, are stuck in the past while the world spins by them. Sonia (Kim Tobin-Lehl) laments that she has no life, her half-brother Vanya (Philip Lehl) waits for a blue heron that never appears.

Somewhat successful actress sister Masha (Patricia Duran), who supports her family, arrives for a costume party at the ritzy neighbors with boy toy Spike (David Gow), who soon lusts after innocent Nina (Skyler Sinclair) while making sexy none-too-subtle overtures to closeted old rumped Vanya. Meanwhile housekeeper Casandra (Jasmine Renee Thomas), like her mythic counterpart, booms predictions that eventually come true even though they make no sense at the time.

This is a fun house of family dysfunction and unhappy people, but flipped into comedic gold by Durang's sharp barbed tongue that softens into wistfulness awash with sweet bliss. You've got to love these sad sacks who say out loud without filters, "Our lives are over," as they melodramatically swoon on the settee. And then in the next instant purr a perfect bon mot.

This comedy is expertly crafted for actors, and 4th Wall's roster could not be improved upon. All mesh like nesting dolls, neat and tidy. And Durang gives each one a moment to shine, little monologues that should be standard on any actor's audition reel.

Vanya gets the best one near the end of Act II, when all his regrets in life are forced to the fore by the supercilious Spike who dares to interrupt Vanya's little play about the end of all life on earth. "We used to lick stamps," he begins, then suddenly erupts into a furious march through the golden years of the '50s when everybody "connected" through shared cultural experiences like Davy Crockett and his coonskin caps; ventriloquist Señor Wencis with his hand that had a mouth painted on it; Ozzie and Harriet's spaced-out family; or the beloved trio of Kukla, Fran, and Ollie. "We talked to puppets," he says in exasperation, as much as in jubilation. Lehl's performance is its own masterclass. A rush of nostalgia for a time no longer remembered or thought relevant in this instant era of gratification. Everybody's alone now, he sighs, on their cell phone or mesmerized by the internet. He apologizes for his rant and goes off into another room to quiet down. On his exit, the audience burst into applause.

Tobin-Lehl, also in Act II, gets her finest moment when a guest at the costume party calls her the next day to ask her out for dinner. It's the classic "phone call" scene. Throughout she's been morose and self-pitying – in a very funny way, of course – a little mouse who bickers with her brother and spars with her sister, but when dressed in sequins and pretending she's Maggie Smith in *California Suite*, she becomes the life of the party. She can be vivacious. You can see her resolve break, then recognition that someone has found her attractive, then immediately thinking that this can't be real, that no one could possibly like her as she is, then giggling in quiet satisfaction when she accepts the date. It's an exquisite scene, subtle and yet full of hope and glee. You can hear the audience catch its breath when she declines his offer. She stares at the phone as if searching her calendar. It's as if her life passes before her in that instant. What will she do? When she accepts Joe's offer, the audience lets out a welcomed sigh of relief. Tobin-Lehl, too, gets exit applause.

Duran makes the insufferable Masha acceptable. Eventually, when Spike proves his worthlessness, she comes around and is redeemed. It's a star-turn of a part, and she plays two-bit drama queen beautifully. We just know Masha has feet of clay and will get her comeuppance, and Duran emotes with wondrous comic timing. Gow is smarmy to a tee as Spike. When not disrobing at every possible moment, he's feeling his body or grinding the ground in pushups. He makes a lovely dumbbell and shines in his moment when he relives his audition for a role in a B-movie. (Surprise, untalented Spike never got it.) And Thomas, as prophetess Casandra, steals the show with her outrageous and sassy voodoo numbers and her over-the-top prophecies of constant doom.



Jasmine Renee Thomas plays housekeeper Cassandra and yes, she mimics that mythological character. **Photo by Gabriella Nissen**

Cunningly directed by 4th Wall artistic director Jennifer Dean, and lovingly placed inside Kirk A. Domer's inside/outside set, lit with craft by Christina Giannelli, and aptly costumed by Leah Smith, *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike* is another in this company's crown jewels. Durang's uplifting and very funny comedy sparkles in the hands of this incandescent company. If you want a holiday present that will not disappoint – or be returned or re-gifted – fly to 4th Wall and unwrap this tiara. Wear it with pride.

Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike continues through December 21 at 7:30 p.m. Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays; 2:30 p.m. Saturday November 30; 3 p.m. Sundays at 4th Wall Theatre Company, 1824 Spring Street. For more information, call 832-767-4991 or visit 4thwalltheatreco.com. \$22-\$62.



D.L. Groover has contributed to countless reputable publications including the *Houston Press* since 2003. His theater criticism has earned him a national award from the Association of Alternative Newsmedia (AAN) as well as three statewide Lone Star Press Awards for the same. He's co-author of the irreverent appreciation, *Skeletons from the Opera Closet* (St. Martin's Press), now in its fourth printing.

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