

## Review: 4th Wall Theatre's 'Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike' is a delight

Christopher Durang's Tony Award-winning take-off on the work of famed Russian writer Anton Chekhov is witty and energetic

By Doni Wilson, Correspondent | Nov 25, 2024



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

You might think three middle-aged siblings who have little in common moaning about whether or not they have lived or lived meaningfully might be kind of a bummer.

Instead, it is a delightful homage to Anton Chekhov and his well-known plays such as "Three Sisters," "Uncle Vanya," and "The Cherry Orchard." These are all plays that might not match the characters that two professors named their children after, but hits the bull's eye on issues such as sibling rivalry, neuroticism, ennui, boredom, regret, dashed expectations, creativity, nostalgia, and resentments. You know: a perfect show for the holiday season.

But you don't have to have read a lick of Chekhov's fiction or drama to enjoy 4th Wall Theatre Company's witty and energetic production of the late Christopher Durang's Tony Award-winning "Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike."

Directed by artistic director (and accomplished actress) Jennifer Dean, you will marvel at the precision of the timing of lines and the extreme care in every move the actors make. There's a chemistry in this ensemble production that is hard to match: sometimes an expression on an actor's face really is worth a thousand words, and some of the most priceless moments are the bewildering non-spoken responses the characters have to each other, or their own issues.

Scholars sometimes comment on how Chekhov's characters are not driven by action, but emotion, and these characters cover every one on those emotion pinwheels therapists give clients to help describe their anger, regret, ennui, and hubris. But it's much more fun to watch some of Houston's favorite artists act all those things out.

The play opens with Kirk A. Domer's wonderful domestic outdoor setting of the family's Pennsylvania home that they have lived in forever. Sonia (a superlative Kim Tobin-Lehl) and Vanya (Philip Lehl—who gives a monologue for the ages that you won't forget) act like an old and cranky married couple, but they are siblings who have taken care of their parents before their deaths. Now they have to think about living, and what to live for.

They might lose their home (that is both a comfort and a cage) if their drama queen actress sister Masha (perfectly played by a terrific Patricia Duran) has her way. She is having an affair with Spike (a hilarious David Gow), a decades younger aspiring actor. After all, he almost got a part in "Entourage 2," and his try-out demonstration is laugh out loud funny. Spike's main identity is his sexiness, and Gow's hilarious physicality is comedy gold.

Cassandra (Jasmine Renee Thomas) is the housekeeper, who has visions, voodoo dolls and funny prophecies that are dismissed just like her Greek mythological namesake. Remember when Chekhov said that if a gun is on the set at the beginning of a play, it better go off by the end of it? Well, Cassandra is the shotgun and steals a lot of scenes with her predictions: what she throws up comically comes down in her stream of consciousness rants, and the energy she brings to every scene never flags.

Skyler Sinclair is the adorable and idealistic Nina, who is in awe of Masha's film and stage fame, but is smarter than she looks. Of Spike and his tendency to strip and preen, she admits that he is sexy, but says that everything about him is "attractive" except "his personality."

It's a dynamite cast, and whether the scene is sad and fraught, or zany with a dash of slapstick, few plays really understand that the challenges of relationships and contemporary life (the speed of which is unforgettably addressed in the play Vanya writes as he tries to explain his frustration with the end of the earth and the passage of time) in a way that captures Chekhov's sensibilities.

Yes, cherry orchards get chopped down, spinsters pine and wait, glamorous careers lose their shine or never begin at all. Yet disasters reveal our laments, and our emotional vicissitudes measure who we are as time passes. Like Vanya, we can be "worried about the future" and "miss the past." We can forget dates and decades, and "just live," or keep our "sadness to ourselves" as we regret not really living. But as Sonia says, "If everyone took antidepressants, then Chekhov would have nothing to write about."

We can think "our lives are over," but thank goodness Durang's original and engaging comedy reminds us that it's not quite over—at least not yet.

### **'Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike'**

When: Through Dec. 21 at 7:30 p.m. TH, F, SAT; 2:30 p.m. SAT November 30; 3 p.m. SUN

Where: 4th Wall Theatre Company, 1824 Spring Street

Details: \$22-\$62; [4thwalltheatreco.com](http://4thwalltheatreco.com); 832-767-4991