

VANYA AND SONIA AND MASHA AND SPIKE at 4th Wall Theatre Company

A show about siblings and stress - perfect for the holidays!

By: [Brett Cullum](#) | Nov. 29, 2024



Photo provided by Gabriella Nissen and features [Kim Tobin-Lehl](#) (left) and [Patricia Duran](#) (right)

4TH Wall Theatre Company certainly knows how to time things. Their production of VANYA AND SONIA AND MASHA AND SPIKE comes only months after the play's celebrated author, [Christopher Durang](#), passed, and in the script is a sweet tribute to the unstoppable [Maggie Smith](#), who also left us this year. 2024 was one of those devastating periods when we lost many great theater and entertainment artists. On top of all of this, the production marks the "changing of the guard" for the troop as [Jennifer Dean](#) steps in to take the reigns of Artistic Director from co-founders [Kim Tobin-Lehl](#) and her husband [Philip Lehl](#), who formerly ran it. So, there is a lot to honor and remember heading into this endearing comedy about family and the dramatic ties that bind us together. At its core, this play is just a ton of fun, and this production comes at a time when we all could honestly use a good laugh. It's a great way to say goodbye to 2024 and a joy to revisit this brilliant gem that Durang gifted the world in 2013.

VANYA AND SONIA AND MASHA AND SPIKE is a Tony-award-winning play from a master of the ridiculous comedy. This one takes common tropes of Russian playwright Chekhov and mixes them up with a pair of siblings (Vanya and Sonia) who are living together bereft and alone after the death of their parents, who they took care of. Enter their movie star sister (MASHA), who has been footing their bills lately with her "boy toy" (Spike) in tow. Together with a neighbor and their housekeeper who all bear the dangers of tobacco usage, all sorts of tomfoolery emerge under the seagulls as we realize Masha is ready to sell the property right from under these three siblings, give up their cherry orchard and leave it to the "wood demon." The previous sentence is my lame attempt at a Chekhov joke, and I assure you Durang's are far funnier and more assured. These dramatic events force Vanya and Sonia to confront their own demons, and the results are a series of manic scenes taken straight from literary classics like THE

SEAGULL, THE CHERRY ORCHARD, UNCLE VANYA, and THE THREE SISTERS. They are all reinvented by Durang to become sharp, sardonic jabs at what life's purpose ultimately is and what family means to individuals.

The aforementioned 4TH Wall founders [Kim Tobin-Lehl](#) and [Philip Lehl](#) take on the two siblings as Vanya and Sonia. In an ironic turn, they are playing two souls who feel like they just can't move forward from where they are, and then the world gets shaken for them (timing!). It's always a treat to see these two actors play off each other, and they have a sense that each other "feels like home." Their characters are grounded, and the comedy rolls off them easily because you can sense the trust and belief underneath every line. Kim plays to Sonia's sweet and soft side, and we ache for her need to make a connection. Philip portrays Vanya as a touch quieter than I have seen in previous productions, and he gives him intellectual grace even during an infamous monologue in which he has a nervous breakdown in front of us. They are masterful at dialing things down to make them even funnier with their approach. Sometimes, you don't have to hit so hard in comedy; these two are game for anything. Vanya and Sonia are in their heads as much as they are in their bodies, and you can feel this push-pull with these two.

Thankfully, [Patricia Duran](#) will have none of this quiet questioning or soft business as Masha. She is a diva from entrance one to the final exit, and the actress is hysterical as the successful thespian who holds the family together financially. She's strong, having none of it, and you will comply. She's a brilliant storm of a woman. [David Gow](#) takes on Spike with no hint of fuss or fluster as he is constantly required to shed his clothes (much to the delight of the older ladies in the front row during my performance). Gow is a natural physical comedian, and does wonders with the part of the male "himbo" he is given. I would give my right eye to look as good as him delivering my lines in nothing but my Calvin Kleins. [Jasmine Renee Thomas](#) is also simply hysterical as Cassandra, a clairvoyant fountain of sassy remarks that made me smile anytime she showed up. Finally, there is Skyler Sinclair, who is charming and wonderful as the neighbor girl named Nina, a character who stands in for important Chekhov parodies. Everyone here is spot-on and [Ready to Play](#).

Technically, the laughs are earned just as easily and genuinely. **Kirk A. Domer's set is homey and inviting and gives us a winsome backyard in which to witness everything.** Christina Gianelli works miracles with the lights, keeping up as the actors bounce around the stage. [Leah Smith](#)'s costumes are wonderfully fun, from Snow White to a sequined something that [Maggie Smith](#) never wore to the Oscars, yet we buy it. [Jennifer Dean](#)'s direction is a master class in pacing and doing comedy right. She keeps everything assuredly moving as quickly as it needs to, and the play flies by.

I feel like this company, at this point in time, is simply happy to be here doing this show, and I can say the feeling is infectious. It's not your typical holiday offering, but you can never be wrong with the wit of [Christopher Durang](#) and the magic of invoking the spirit of [Maggie Smith](#). I'm thankful this season for companies like 4th WALL, which produce plays that offer the joy of what theater is all about. Plus, you can drink wine in the dark as three siblings poke at each other about how they ruined each other's lives. And suddenly, I feel as if I am back home for the holidays... maybe this is more of a perfectly timed play than I thought. I will be over here crying, dressed in all black, and mourning for my life. Timing is everything!

VANYA AND SONIA AND MASHA AND SPIKE runs at the 4th Wall space on Spring Street through December 21st. It's a great setting for a show, with easy parking and some of the most impressive art in Houston hanging in the halls. It's very close to I-10, and the area has many restaurants and bars.