Vanya and Sonya and Mash and Spike: The Study Guide

ThreePenny Cafe Presents
VANYA AND SONIA AND MASHA AND SPIKE
Written By Christopher Durang
Directed by Julie Hamberg

MARCH 6-28
Winner of the 2013 Tony Award for Best Play
Gibson Theater / 123 East Water Street / 434.977.4177 / livearts.org
Meet the Playwright

Christopher Durang, a playwright and actor, is a published writer who typically crafts comedies – satire, dark comedy, parody, or absurdist. *The Idiots of Karamazov*, co-authored with Yale classmate Albert Innaurato, was his first professional production at the Yale Repertory Theatre and featured then student Meryl Streep. Next, in 1975, his play *The Nature and Purpose of the Universe* was presented off-off Broadway at the Direct Theatre. *A History of the American Film* was a play that was produced by the Eugene O’Neill National Playwriting Conference in 1976, and then had three back-to-back productions at the Hartford Stage Company, Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, and Arena Stage in Washington D.C. Following this “triple premiere” it moved to Broadway and earned Durang a Tony nomination for Best Book of a Musical.

In 1979, Durang and Sigourney Weaver rewrote *Das Lusitania Songspiel*, which became a cult success that satirized the work of Brecht and Weill with mishmashes of current shows. The musical garnered both Durang and Weaver Drama Desk nominations for Best Performer in a Musical. *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You* was another success. Despite a rough start in raising money to move it to a commercial production, Andre Bishop re-presented the play and garnered favor from critics, moving the play to Off-Broadway for a run lasting over two years.

He soon had several more plays published and performed, including *Beyond Therapy* (1981), *Baby With The Bathwater* (1983), *The Marriage of Bette and Boo* (1985). Durang has also written unproduced teleplays, screenplays, and in 1989 returned to cabaret and performed his mock nightclub act *Chris Durang and Dawne* in New York City. He acted in a few productions, and then some films including *The Butcher’s Wife* (1991), *Housesitter* (1992), and *Mr. North* (1988).

The 90s provided Durang with more productions of his plays, and in 1994 he and playwright Marsha Norman were named co-chairs of the Playwriting Program at the Juilliard School in Manhattan. The program includes only 8 students a year, many of whom go on to distinguish themselves professionally.

Visit http://www.christopherdurang.com/ for more on Christopher Durang.
Plays by Christopher Durang

- The Actor's Nightmare
- Baby with the Bathwater
- Beyond Therapy
- Sister Mary Ignatius Explains it All
- Mrs. Bob Cratchit's Wild Christmas Binge
- The Marriage of Bette & Boo
- The Vietnamization of New Jersey
- Betty's Summer Vacation
About the Play

Plot Overview

We open in present day Bucks County, PA, in a farmhouse. Middle-aged siblings Vanya (a gay man) and Sonia (his adopted sister) have lived comfortably at home taking care of their theater-enthusiast parents. Neither has matured or grown up to get a job and both are financially supported by their movie star sister Masha. We get a slice of life through their morning of reflection on their lifestyle, the theater background provided by their parents, and chances they’ve lost due to staying at home with their parents. But their life of laying around in self-pity is soon interrupted.

When Masha and her new boy toy, Spike, come home for a surprise visit, the sparks and cut-downs really fly. It’s a story of love and lust and sibling rivalry with the added bonus of a clairvoyant house maid. With siblings named after Chekhov characters, and a quirky take on Chekhovian themes, this black comedy is as touching as it is funny.

The original production

Christopher Durang describes the play not as a Chekhov parody, but a play that uses the basis of Chekhov scenes and characters and combines them in different ways. Some characters in Durang’s play share the names of characters in Chekhov plays, but none should be taken as directly the same characters. Different similarities among the characters can be traced through Chekhov works and other references, which can be found further in this study guide.

Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike was originally a one-act play that premiered on September 14, 2012 and ran through October 14. The play opened Off-Broadway in November 2012 and ran until January 2013. The run was sold out, but the play was leaving Off-Broadway to transfer to Broadway with its original cast: Sigourney Weaver as Masha, David Hyde Pierce as Vanya, Kristine Nielsen as Sonia, Billy Magnussen as Spike, Shalita Grant as Cassandra, and Genevieve Angelson as Nina. The play’s Broadway run opened on March 14, 2013 and last until August 25 of that year for a total of 201 performances.

The production received six Tony Award nominations at the 67th Tony Award and won for Best Play. Pierce, Nielsen, Magnussen, and Grant each earned a nomination for their acting performances, and Nicholas Martin earned a nomination for Best Direction of a Play. Additionally, Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike received the 2013 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Play and the New York Drama Critic’s Circle Award for Best Play.
References in the Play

Anton Chekhov

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, born on January 29, 1860 in Taganrog, Russia, was born to a family with financial troubles. In 1875 the family moved to Moscow when his father’s business failed, but Chekhov stayed behind to finish his studies. He moved to Moscow in 1879, enrolled at medical school, and supported the family with his freelance writing by producing short comic pieces for local magazines. His first story to be published was in the humor journal Strekoza, which Chekhov marked as the beginning of his literary career.

In the mid-1880s Chekhov practiced as a physician and published serious works of fiction, influenced by the major Russian realists of the century. This was a shift in his style as he desired to move beyond comedy and give a try at tragedy. He also began writing comedic farces for the theater, but later developed a mix of comedy and tragedy. During this time he decided to explore Europe and experience the beauty of the locations, but he realized he was becoming ill of tuberculosis.

As his work developed in the 1890s, Chekhov illustrated how ordinary events can carry deeper meaning and began concentrating on mood and characters to show greater significance on their experiences in the play. Chekhov then collaborated with Constantin Stanislavki and the Moscow Art Theater to produce his plays, including The Seagull (1895), Uncle Vanya (1897), The Three Sisters (1901), and The Cherry Orchard (1904). Chekhov later died of tuberculosis at the age of 44 in 1904 at a health resort in Badenweiler, Germany.

Early works by Chekhov:
The Worthless Fellow Platonov (1881)
On the Harmful Effects of Tobacco (published 1886, revised into a best known 1902 version)
Swansong (1887)
Ivanov (written and premiered 1887)
The Bear or The Boor (written and premiered 1888)
A Marriage Proposal (written 1888-1889, premiered 1890)
A Tragedian in Spite of Himself or A Reluctant Tragic Hero (written 1889)
The Wood Demon (written in 1888, premiered 1889)
The Wedding (written in 1889, premiered 1900)
The Festivities (written 1891)
Plays by Chekhov, Connections to Durang

**The Seagull** (written in 1895, premiered 1896):

Considered to be the first of Chekhov’s major plays, *The Seagull* dramatizes romance and artistic conflicts between a story writer named Boris Trigorin, an ingénue Nina, a fading actress named Irina Arkadina, and her son and playwright Konstantin Tréplev. The play utilizes an ensemble cast, similar to *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike*, and has characters that speak in ways to avoid addressing topics directly – otherwise known now as subtext. The opening of the first production was a failure because the actress playing Nina lost her voice from being intimidated by the audience. A later production became a triumphant success, which put *The Seagull* as a great new development in world drama. *The Seagull* has a character named Nina and another named Masha, both which are used to name two of the characters in Durang’s play. Early in the play Sonia says “But I’m mourning for my life” to which Vanya responds: “I hope you’re not going to make Chekhov references all day.” Sonia’s quote is a direct line from Masha in *The Seagull*.

**Uncle Vanya** (published 1897, premiered 1899):

In this play, an elderly professor owns a rural estate that supports his urban lifestyle. The estate is run by Vanya, the brother of the Professor’s late first wife, and Sonya, the Professor’s daughter by his first wife. The professor and his much younger second wife make a visit to the estate, which causes complications when he announces his intention to sell the estate, which has become Vanya and Sonia’s home, hoping to invest the proceeds to acquire a higher income for himself and his wife.

**Are there parallels in Durang’s play?** The similarities from this very brief overview show that two protagonists are comfortably living in an estate, much like Vanya and Sonia in Durang’s play. There’s the notion that the owner is somehow related to those two characters - in Durang’s play Masha, the sister of Vanya and Sonia, is the owner. Not only that, the owner appears to be very wealthy - Chekhov’s professor owns property that funds his lifestyle in the urban world, and Masha is a successful actress who pays for the home in Durang’s play. Similar plot elements with selling the estate arise, and Durang’s play also features the owner to having a younger companion - Masha’s boyfriend Spike is much younger than her.
Three Sisters (written in 1900, premiered 1901):

Sometimes seen as a take on the Bronte sisters, this Chekhov play follows the relationships of the Sergeyevna sisters, with each other and with men. The play begins with the anniversary of their father’s death, in addition to the youngest sister, Irina’s, name day. In following a similar Chekhov theme, the sisters discover that their brother, Andrei, has mortgaged the household and kept the money to pay off gambling debts. Perhaps one of the characters in Durang’s play is inspired by one of Chekhov’s characters, as one of the sisters is also named Masha.

The Cherry Orchard (written in 1903, premiered 1904)

In a province of Russia in the early 20th century, Lyubov Ranevskaya has been living with an unnamed lover since her son died but is soon brought home after an attempted suicide. Once she arrives, Lopahkin arrives to tell the family that the estate will be auctioned away to pay off the family’s debts, but proposes to save the estate by make it a development project for summer cottages by destroying the cherry orchard. The other family members grow fearful of this impending situation, not only because it would ruin their family home but would uproot the lives that they have and would force them to consider how they will move on – Varya is unsure about what her marital status will be and Lyubov discovers her love to be ill. In acceptance of the selling of the estate, the family packs up and gets ready to leave.

Questions to consider when watching the show: How does Christopher Durang use elements from Chekhov’s plays while still making the situation fresh, new, and modern? Does knowing that his play has similarities to Chekhov’s plays influence the way you perceive it? Why might playwrights draw inspiration from other works by previous playwrights?
Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

As a quick refresher, or brief summary for anyone unfamiliar with the story, Disney’s *Snow White* (1937) is an animated adaptation of the Brothers Grimm fairy tale. It tells the story of a young princess who is nearly killed by a hunter who was hired by a jealous queen. The hunter ultimately doesn’t kill Snow White and instead tells her to flee her home, and Snow White finds herself in a cottage owned by seven dwarfs. They she cleans their home and they become good friends, and one day the queen discovers that Snow White is still alive and takes matters into her own hand to kill her with a poisonous apple. The dwarfs chase down the queen to a point where she falls off a cliff, and Snow White is saved from her comatose state when the handsome Prince Charming gives her a kiss and they ride off to a happily ever after.

Since its release, there have been many parodies, interpretations, and adaptations of the *Snow White* story. The ABC series *Once Upon a Time* uses the story as one of its central plotlines, starring Ginnifer Goodwin as Snow White. In some productions the character is featured or referenced in Stephen Sondheim’s musical *Into the Woods*. *Sydney White* (2007) takes the story into modern day and adapts it to a college setting, while *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012) and *Mirror, Mirror* (2012) maintain the magical qualities of the story and adjust different elements.

Snow White is a consistent reference in the play, and in *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike* the Disney film’s story arc and key traits are a major part of the play. The social politics that comes with the certain roles of the story – the prince, the princess, the dwarfs, the witch – are all significant to bringing out different dimensions of the relationships between the siblings and Masha’s boyfriend Spike. This is one of the hugely comical scenes of the play because of the reveal of the characters’ costumes for a party they will attend. As expected, Masha, the beautiful actress, takes the role of Snow White while her boyfriend Spike goes as the prince. Vanya takes the role of Doc, one of the dwarfs, while Sonia makes an entrance with her take as the queen.
Entourage

Entourage is an HBO comedy-drama series that premiered in 2004 and concluded in 2011 after eight seasons. It follows the acting career of Vincent Chase, a young A-list movie star actor, and his friends from childhood friends from New York as they adjust to Los Angeles, California. The series focuses on male friendship and real-life situations in modern day Hollywood, bringing in several guest stars in featured and cameo roles. The premise of the series is loosely based on Executive Producer Mark Wahlberg’s experience as an up-and-coming film star. In the Durang’s play, Spike is said to have almost been cast in the sequel to Entourage, called Entourage 2. Fittingly, he is also a young, up-and-coming acting star.

Fun fact: a film, serving as a continuation of the series, is scheduled for release in June, 2015.

Greek Mythology – Cassandra, and the Trojan Horse

Cassandra is the cleaning lady and soothsayer for the home in Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike. Vanya notes that Cassandra may take her name too seriously as a soothsayer, referencing Greek mythology in which “Apollo gave Cassandra second sight, but then cursed her so no one ever believed her.” A common expansion of this story is that Apollo gave her this sight of prophecy in an attempt to seduce her, but Cassandra refused him which causes the curse upon her. She foresaw the destruction of Troy after Paris brings Helen of Greece to the city, seeing the Greeks hiding in the Trojan Horse, and predicting the demise of many other Greek characters. However, no one believed her so she was unable to prevent any of these things. In another version, Cassandra gains the ability of prophecy when she sleeps in a temple near snakes that whisper into her ear.

In Durang’s play, Cassandra delivers an adapted version of a passage from The Fall of Troy by Quintus, adapted by A.S. Way and another excerpt describing the fall of Agamemnon.
The Reluctant Debutante

The Reluctant Debutante is a play by British playwright William Douglas-Home. The light-hearted comedic play follows an aristocratic family during a debutante season in London. The mother is experiencing anxiety and attempts to avoid scandal when she sets her daughter up with the wrong man – both are named David, although one is known to be a philanderer while the other is meant to be the perfect match for her daughter. The debutante event is where parents can find “suitable” husbands for their daughters, which causes problems now that there is potential that this David could be a womanizer. The play was adapted into a film in 1958, directed by Vincente Minnelli, starring Rex Harrison and Kay Kendall. The Reluctant Debutante is referenced when Vanya reflects on how active the siblings’ parents were in community theatre, listing The Reluctant Debutante and Oresteia.

Oresteia

Oresteia: a trilogy of Greek tragedies, written by Aechylus, that follows the end of the curse of the House of Atreus. The three plays are Agamemnon, The Libation Bearers, and The Eumenides. Agamemnon follows the titular character’s return from the Trojan War, where his wife, Clytemnestra, has been waiting and planning his murder out of revenge for sacrificing their daughter and because Clytemnestra has been in an adulterous affair with Agamemnon’s cousin during his absence. Agamemnon’s cousin, Aegisthus, is also determined to gain control after his family branch was killed by Agamemnon’s father, Thyestes. The Libation Bearers follows the reunion of Agamemnon’s children, Electra and Orestes, and their revenge against Clytemnestra for the death of Agamemnon. Orestes was the son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, so out of vengeance for his father he kills his mother. The third play, The Eumenides, follows Orestes, Apollo, and the Erinyes (the Furies, deities of vengeance), to determine if Orestes’s killing of his mother in the previous play makes him guilty of the crime of murder.
The Imaginary Invalid

The Imaginary Invalid is a 1673 three-act comedic play with dance sequences and musical interludes. Written by French playwright Molière, the play is about a hypochondriac man named Argan who believes he is afflicted with diseases and illnesses and plans to marry his daughter Angelique to his doctor’s nephew, another doctor, in order to receive constant medical attention. But his daughter has already fallen in love with another man, Cleante, and is devastated by the news. The news also causes complications with Argan’s wife, who married him for his money and does not wish to have to pay a dowry for his needs. As the play progresses, we see the doctors enter the plot, Angelique’s resistance from this situation, and the witty maid attempting to create a shift in the situation as she helps Argan accept his daughter’s feelings. In Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike, Vanya and Sonia reflect on how their parents were very involved with community theatre. Vanya adds in “Having professors for parents had its drawbacks” and discusses when he was seven and his father asked who wrote The Imaginary Invalid, to which Vanya mistakenly responded “Neil Simon.”

Stanislavskian sense memory

Affective memory: an element of Konstantin Stanislavski’s “system” of Method Acting. It requires actors to call on details of similar situation (or a situation with similar emotional import) to those of their characters. Actors would need to take emotion and personality and access it when in character. Sense memory specifically refers to recalling physical sensations surrounding emotional events as opposed to emotions themselves. The system is a progression of techniques to train actors on drawing believable emotions to performances from memory.

Meisner repetition technique

An acting technique developed by theatre practitioner Sanford Meisner, this technique creates the actor externally and behave instinctively. There is greater focus on other actors as opposed to the character’s internal thoughts or feelings. With the repetition, both actors sit across from each other and respond repeating a phrase with different tone, inflection, and intensity to change the meaning of the line. The actors respond freely and spontaneously. Both this technique and the Stanislavskian system part on sense memory are referenced by Masha when she describes her acting training.