

CHANNELING CHEKOV

The upper classes get poked in OCT's production of Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike

Premiering this weekend at Oregon Contemporary Theatre, *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike*, winner of the 2013 Tony Award for best play, represents a kind of second act for playwright Christopher Durang.

"Durang is known for his outrageous comedy, and rightfully so," OCT director Tara Wibrew says. "But I particularly appreciate that his characters are lovable. In many of Durang's pieces, there isn't a villain against a hero — just good people taking opposing routes in an attempt to make life better."

In the 1980s, Durang's absurdist parodies etched an indelible mark on American theater. If you went to the theater during that decade, you probably saw a Durang play: *The Actor's Nightmare*, *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*, *Baby With the Bathwater* or *Beyond Therapy*. Durang's endeavors epitomized the shoulder-padded, wine cooler swilling, jewel-toned excesses of that oppressively weird time.

In *Vanya*, Durang plumbs even deeper, looking to playwright Anton Chekhov, who himself made a career of subtly lampooning the glut of czarist Russia.

"Chekhov presents those in theoretical comfort — namely the upper classes — and pokes and pokes," Wibrew muses. "He uses humor to present society's biggest desires and identify the folly in the dream."

STORM KENNEDY AND JOSH FRANCIS
IN OCT'S *VANYA AND SONIA AND
MASHA AND SPIKE*



Aside from the direct references made to Chekhov, Wibrew says Durang's latest play harkens back to some of Chekhov's favorite themes: disillusionment, dissipating nostalgia and failed ideals.

"I'm not sure there is enough door-slamming or mistaken identity for it to be a farce," Wibrew says. "And probably not enough death to be a dramedy. Maybe it's a pop-culture comedy?"

Just imagine Chekhov's moody oeuvre pulsed in a Cuisinart until only delicious tropes of perpetually quarreling siblings remain, such as the depressed brother, the reclusive sister, the grubbing sister and the boyfriend.

OCT's production features Storm Kennedy, Russell Dyball, Nancy West, Josh Francis, Donella-Elizabeth Alston and Hailey Henderson.

In his raucous ensembles, Durang has always had a knack for making gloomy, self-serving, petulant people funny, and *Vanya* is no exception.

"From the outside, we can see others better than they can see themselves," Wibrew explains. "Which can also mean a gentler, lighter perspective on circumstances that appear dire from the inside."

Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike opens Friday, May 20, and runs through June 11 at Oregon Contemporary Theatre; \$15-\$35, tickets at otheatre.org or 541-465-1506.

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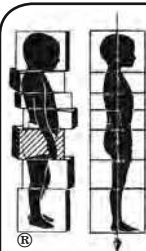
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