

# REGRET, REGRET, REGRET

Chekov updated for a post-Prozac world in OCT's uneven production of *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike*

**A**s with writers David Mamet or Aaron Sorkin, to properly experience playwright Christopher Durang you first have to commit to the musical rhythms of his language. Durang's humor, dark and cynical as it is, lies within that rhythm.

Under the direction of Tara Wibrew, Durang's award-winning 2012 comedy *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike* is on now at Oregon Contemporary Theatre. Opening night, OCT's production hit the beat at times, only to falter at others.

The play tells the story of Vanya and Sonia (played respectively by Russell Dyball and Nancy West), a pair of siblings living in rural Pennsylvania who are financially supported by their movie star sister Masha (played by Storm Kennedy).

See a pattern here? You don't have to be intimately familiar with Russian playwright Anton Chekov to get *Vanya and Sonia*, at least not on any deeper level than Russian literature equals grand human misery. Durang's script is, however, peppered with allusions to Chekov, and familiarity will only deepen your appreciation.

Vanya and Sonia's bucolic yet sad-sack existence is disrupted when Masha sweeps in from the city with her too-young-for-her beefcake boyfriend Spike (Josh Francis). Masha is like a black hole of self-absorption; for Durang's characters, self-pity and self-effacement are like pastimes. Upon entering, Masha is given the stage, and Kennedy bulldozes Durang's language to an unfortunate extent, just as Masha bulldozes people in her life.

Soon, Kennedy settles into the role nicely and you understand that perhaps Wibrew and Kennedy looked at

Masha like an onion, slowly peeling back the layers of youth obsession and superficiality to see the wounds and suffering underneath.

And with Durang, wounds and suffering are always funny. Soon the pretty and well-scrubbed local girl, Nina (Hailey Henderson), comes between Masha and Spike. Kennedy nails the pathos of a starlet in decline, grappling with jealousy and petty insecurities.

The introduction of Nina highlights some awkward stage direction hampering the play. Nina is purportedly a paragon of youthful beauty, yet for an extended period of time, half the audience stares only at her back. Later, a sight gag is lost due to a similar staging gaffe.

Another wobbly part of the production lies in the script itself. The character Cassandra is Vanya and Sonia's soothsaying black housekeeper, and Donella-Elizabeth Alston is excellent in the role with several great comic moments. I wonder, however, what Cassandra's blatant Mammy archetype adds to the play, particularly juxtaposed to Durang's usual all-white Northeastern sensibilities and preoccupations.

Much more consistent are Dyball and West as Vanya and Sonia. Their moments alone on stage are Durang at his finest. Vanya is not so much a closeted gay man as a highly repressed individual in all aspects of his life. Dyball conveys a lifetime of unfulfilled longing, gazing upon Spike's frequently naked torso. And West's understated comic timing shows she truly understands Durang's absurd, caustic and highly funny worldview.

*Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike* plays through June 11 at Oregon Contemporary Theatre; info and tickets at octheatre.org or 541-465-1506. — William Kennedy



SCOTTY PEREY AND JUDITH ROBERTS

## FORGET THE FOURTH WALL

Magical Moombah brings fun, frolic and the American songbook to kids

**N**ow celebrating its 14th season, The Shedd's Magical Moombah serves up vaudevillian romps for kids as well as kids-at-heart.

I chased down two of Moombah's illustrious founders, Judith "Sparky" Roberts and Scotty Perey, to see what makes Moombah tick.

"The main idea is to share songs — American standards — from the popular awareness," Roberts says.

In a Moombah show, those songs are packaged in a way that's kid-centered and fun.

Perey, owner of Madison Meadow Music and longtime performer with The Sugar Beets, says he's best known in the community for playing Moombah character Mumbles "Dog Breath" Hangnail, a bumbling, immature cowboy bent on perpetrating one half-baked scheme after another.

"Dog Breath is a nickname," Perey explains.

Writer, director and cast member Roberts adds that, despite her decades teaching and performing theater, in the eyes of the Moombah audience, "I'm just Gloria's friend."

Gloria, it should be noted, is a 2-foot tall puppet who is "not always pleased that I'm with her," Roberts says. "She'd rather do a solo act."

Four times a year, Mumbles, Gloria and a cast of first-rate Moombah musicians and actors performs songs, skits and schtick.

Moombah sparks plenty of audience interaction, with jolly sing-a-longs, parades, onstage contests and oodles of good-natured yelling, like when the aforementioned Mumbles gets too close to the pie he's been forbidden to touch — a leitmotif, if you will — invariably inspiring the mass of kids and their parents to chant "Pie!" until onstage help arrives.

"We're loose with the fourth wall," Perey adds of the relationship between audience and performers. "Talking to them, interacting with them. At the end of the show, we go sit at the edge of the stage and the kids come up and we talk and answer questions."

And in every show, sight gags abound, as the creative cast, crew and the administrative folk at The Shedd offer collaborative suggestions. In recent years, favorites have included a series of blow-up bubble suits.

In fact, there is nothing this audience member relishes more, pretty much on planet Earth, than Moombah co-founder Sylvain Duplant in a blow-up ballerina suit, shooting looks at the audience for laughing at him, which of course only makes the audience laugh more.

Magical Moombah's *Dancing on the Moon!* plays 10:15 am Friday, May 27, and 10 am and 1 pm Saturday, May 28, at The Shedd; \$5, tickets and info at 541-434-7000 or theshedd.org. — Rachael Carnes

## MEDIEVAL MALARKEY

The irreverent postmodern humor of Monty Python — a stew of bawdy iconoclasm, parodic schmaltz and geek-boy cheekery — achieved perhaps its finest expression in the 1975 movie *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. This cult classic contains so many insider touchstones (the Knights Who Say Ni, Frenchmen who fart in your general direction, a homicidal rabbit) that, by now, it requires its own cultural thesaurus.

With a shrug of endearing opportunism, Python alum Eric Idle tapped the *Holy Grail's* vast reservoir of goofs and gags for *Spamalot*, a shambolic Broadway production that gooses the conventions and traditions of musical theater every step of the way.

Very Little Theatre's current production of *Spamalot*, ably directed by Chris Pinto, is as rambling and clunky as the material itself, part choreographed romp and part insider wink-wink. Floating on a wave of Pythonesque goodwill, the show takes a while to find its footing, but eventually all proves well in the kingdom: The Black Knight (Damon Noyes) is properly de-limbed, Brave Sir Robin (Scott Machado) shits his knickers and the Grail itself is found, in the unlikeliest of places.

The large, young cast is robustly dedicated to the shenanigans at hand, and several of the big musical numbers come off with a real bang, especially "You Won't Succeed on Broadway," Idle's affectionate goosing of box-office acumen that says, "You are dead if you don't have any Jews." Shawn Bookey plays it deliciously straight as the insipidly earnest King Arthur, and Benjamin Sanders is appropriately preening as the vainglorious Sir Lancelot.

But the show, in many ways, belongs to Jennifer Parks as the Lady of the Lake, an epic diva whose glittering bitchiness is a perfect counterpoint to the scatological grit of Arthur's clumsy questing. Parks, who was so divine in Actors Cabaret's recent production of *Falling for Eve*, is rapidly distinguishing herself as one of the region's finest comic actors; she's got the timing of a veteran, and her voice is pure gold.

All told, Very Little Theatre's mounting (pun intended) of *Spamalot* is a lot of fun, even if it's not always sharp. Some opening-night hitches included delayed knocks when the monks smacked their heads with holy texts (giving the same effect as when the voice track is off on the tube), and, in general, an uneven sound quality that had the audience occasionally straining to hear what was going on.

But such issues proved minor annoyances, and likely they'll be hammered smooth in subsequent productions. What's more, the show itself allows for a kind of shaggy fatalism that flips the bird at over-achievement, because surging beneath all the silliness of *Spamalot* is a subtle criticism of any endeavor that takes itself too seriously, whether that be a search for a holy grail or the White House.

In this regard, then, VLT's production is a welcome antidote to the colossal anxiety gripping us right now — an antidote hinted at cleverly during the show, which razzes both Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders. In the hands of Monty Python, this year's election is just another fart in your general direction.

*Spamalot* plays through June 5 at Very Little Theatre; info and tickets at thevlt.com or 541-344-7751. — Rick Levin