

‘Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike’: a comedy about connections

By **NANCY MCCARTHY**
Cannon Beach Gazette

Vanya bemoans a lost past. Sonia laments that she is a “wild turkey.” Masha lusts after what could have been. No one is satisfied with their lives.

But they are connected by the ultimate tie that binds: the family tie.

Their story is told in the play “Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike,” which opened at the Coaster Theatre Playhouse Feb. 1 and runs weekends through Feb. 23.

Winner of the 2013 Tony Award for Best Play, the comedy was written by Christopher Durang, who incorporated references from Anton Chekhov’s plays. It takes place in the morning room of a farmhouse in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Vanya and his adopted sister, Sonia, grew up in the home and took care of their parents, who both suffered from Alzheimer’s disease for 15 years.

Now alone and wondering what happened to their lives, they are visited by their older sister, Masha, a glamorous screen and stage star, who brings along her lover, the much younger Spike.

Director Susi Brown, who has directed several productions at the Coaster, says the play is “very much about family and the sense of home.”

“Every family has their squabbles and moments of pulling together ... and I think Durang has really explored that in terms of finding and creating two middle-aged, very dissatisfied people with the way their lives have turned out — or not turned out,” Brown said.

The play is also about choices.

“Sometimes choices are foisted upon us; we



Cast members Gigi Chadwick, Rick Grey and Sheila Shaffer.

IF YOU GO

What: “Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike”

Where: Coaster Theatre Playhouse

When: Performances weekends through Feb. 23

don’t make those choices,” Brown said. “I think that is very much the case of Sonia and Vanya. I don’t think they ever considered there was a choice to take care of their parents or not, they just did. I don’t think they saw a way out.

“Masha, on the other hand, is the oldest — that says something about making choices. She did make choices. But she has regretted some of her choices because, I believe, it has



Bob Kroll Photography

Rick Grey, Katrina Godderz and Daric Moore in “Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike.”

made her into a person she didn’t want to be. It took this visit home to figure that out.”

Knotty problems

While the siblings become entangled in their

familial ties, three other characters present some knotty problems of their own.

Spike is Masha’s bouncy, energetic boy toy, who “doesn’t really understand about subtlety, so he’s

really just out there,” said Daric Moore, who plays the young, struggling Hollywood actor.

“He’s the driving force behind what Masha is doing to some degree,” Moore added. “She’s trying to

show him off, she’s trying to impress her siblings.”

Much to Masha’s consternation, Spike shows an interest in Nina (played by Ann Branson), a young star-struck woman who desires to be an actress.

In her own way, Nina brings the family closer together by perceiving each person’s talents they never recognized themselves, Branson said.

“She sees them all as individuals. So it helps break them out of this routine they have been in for so long, to see themselves differently. And this helps them relate to each other differently,” she said.

But Cassandra, the cleaning lady who accurately prophesizes the family’s future with elaborate pronouncements or short outbursts, adds a supernatural element to the play.

“She’s the foreshadower,” said Katrina Godderz, who plays Cassandra. “She’s an impartial observer of the family, but she cares about them. So she’s somebody, who, in a sense, ties them together.”

Although there are references to Chekhov plays, those who haven’t seen or read the writer’s works won’t have trouble following “Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike.”

The cast includes experienced actors: Rick Gray (Vanya) is new to the Coaster, but has an extensive background in regional and professional theater; Sheila Shaffer (Sonia) and Gigi Chadwick (Masha) have performed in numerous Coaster plays, and Shaffer has directed several.

The cast, Brown added, understands the themes Durang pursues in the play.

“Durang is a little daunting; it’s not a Neil Simon comedy,” she said. “There’s a lot to think about when you’re taking on Durang. But this cast has dealt with it very well.”



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