



BUCKS COUNTY BLUES: (L to R) David Hyde Pierce, Sigourney Weaver, Kristine Nielsen, & Billy Magnussen in *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike*. Photo: Carol Rosegg



Theater Review

Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike: Chekhovian angst in Bucks County, PA

VANYA AND SONIA AND MASHA AND SPIKE

Written by Christopher Durang

Directed by Nicholas Martin

Golden Theater

252 West 45th Street

(212-239-6200), <http://www.vanyasoniamashaspikes.com>

By Scott Harrah

The lugubrious essence of Anton Chekhov's plays has always been ripe for parody, and absurdist playwright Christopher Durang wonderfully mines much of the late Russian dramatist's material for laughs in this gleefully silly but stilted comedy.

Even those allergic to Chekhov need not fret, for this is one instance where Chekhov character names are given to three siblings by their parents on purpose, and ultimately for the audience's amusement, and not simply to be embroiled in Chekhovian dramaturgy.

The setting here is not Russia but a country estate in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, with aging gay brother Vanya (David Hyde Pierce) and his middle-aged spinster sister Sonia (Kristine Nielsen), both whining and grumbling about their miserable lives. Most of the action centers on how Vanya and Sonia's world is made even more unbearable by their successful screen-and-stage star sister Masha (Sigourney Weaver), who has returned from her glamorous existence to the family home, with a new, much-younger boy toy, Spike (Billy Magnussen). To add to the madness, their African American housekeeper Cassandra (Shalita Grant) is a self-proclaimed psychic, practices voodoo, and warns them of trouble ahead.

Masha wants to sell the family's estate, which Sonia considers a cherry orchard because it has a few cherry trees. Mr. Durang's script jabs the satirical needle into all the trademark Chekhovian plot twists and contrivances such as depression, self-loathing, and characters longing for love.

Mr. Hyde Pierce and Ms. Nielsen give the most textured, truthful and ultimately hilarious

performances. As the family prepares for a costume party at Dorothy Parker's former home, Ms. Nielsen, impersonating British legend Dame Maggie Smith about to attend the Oscars, gets many well-deserved laughs. However, Mr. Hyde Pierce steals the show in the second act when, as Vanya, he reads a mind-blowing soliloquy from a play he's written that has much to say about the gentler era long before Twitter, Facebook and smartphones. Anyone over 40 will certainly relate to Vanya's speech.

The rest of the cast indulges in excessive hamming and mugging. Ms. Weaver, as Masha, does her best with a mostly thankless role, but it is often difficult to understand her manic delivery of lines. Mr. Magnussen, as Spike, does stripteases, grabs his crotch excessively, and makes gay advances at Vanya that are initially comical, but the humor wears thin as the story progresses. Ms. Grant as Cassandra, the wacky maid with clairvoyant powers, is a hoot at first, but even her performance, like the show's narrative itself, loses steam by act two.

Mr. Durang ridicules all the things that make Chekhov's plays so painfully dull to sit through if one is not a fan, but the show, like any play by the Russian master, often drags too much for its own good. Director Nicholas Martin is certainly no Stanislavski, as he should have reined in some of the over-the-top recklessness of the cast, but there is ultimately a lot of fun going on here despite all the filler and flaws, and *fun* is hardly something anyone experiences while watching a Chekhov play.

Edited by Scott Harrah

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