

# MCT nails Durang's wild family comedy



(From left) W. Scott Whisler, Ashley Sue Perry and Daria E. Troxell star in Mountain Community Theatre's 'Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike.' Photo by Peter Gelblum.

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When it comes to creating wacky, offbeat plays, no one holds a candle to Christopher Durang. His "Baby with the Bathwater," for example, skewers parenthood royally. So it's not surprising that the play for which he won a 2013 Tony Award, "Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike," is offbeat, hilarious and an homage to all things Chekhovian.

Mountain Community Theater's production of "Vanya, etc." is exactly what Durang might have imagined his play to be. And with director Peter Gelblum's gentle coaxing, his remarkable cast nails their peculiar characters, making them both unforgettable and yet laughingly, inherently flawed.

This may sound surprising, perhaps, about a play that includes a fitness-obsessed, egotistical wannabe actor named Spike and three siblings (though one is, as she frequently points out, adopted) whose college-professor parents named them after Chekhovian characters: Vanya and Sonia and Masha.

Durang simply took some of Anton Chekhov's most well-known plays and characters and put them in modern time in a lovely country home in Bucks County, Pennsylvania (which happens to be where Durang actually lives). He obviously enjoys making fun of his own locale because at one point Masha, a fading flower of a movie and theater star uncertainly looks around and says, "Pennsylvania scares me sometimes."

## 'Vanya and Sonia and masha and Spike'

Produced by: Mountain Community Theater

Directed by: Peter Gelblum

When: Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m., Sundays at 2 p.m. through May 28

Where: Park Hall, 9370 Mill St., Ben Lomond

Tickets: \$20 general; \$17 senior/student.

Details: 831-336-4777 or [www.mctshows.org](http://www.mctshows.org)

Scott Boynton's comfy set – the outdoor “morning room” featuring rattan furniture, inviting cushions, the large stone walls of the house at the rear (and a maple china cabinet against one wall) – seems idyllic. Sleepy-eyed, bearded Vanya (a gentle, sweet performance by W. Scott Whisler) comes downstairs in his nightshirt, all set to enjoy a warm cup of coffee and the beauty of the quiet country backyard and pond.

All that changes when sister Sonia arrives carrying a cup of coffee for Vanya. Alternating suppressed anger with despondent resignation, Daria E. Troxell's Sonia is a piece of work. She's dumbfounded that he poured his own coffee and petulantly declares “There are only two pleasant moments in my day. One of them is bringing you coffee.” When he later accepts her cup (to appease her), but later says he likes the first one better, Sonia goes bonkers and throws the cup – and its contents -- against the wall.

And so life goes. These two bicker, snip, whine (actually only Sonia whines) and generally behave like middle-aged married folks. But of course they're not married; they've just been living together for far too many years. Together they cared for their parents in their decline; afterward, since neither had a profession, nor a partner (he's gay; she's perilously close to being a spinster), they just stayed at the family farmhouse.

But everything changes when Masha, who owns the family home (and pays all its bills), shows up with her boy-toy Spike, 20-plus years her junior but apparently great in bed. Masha has had five husbands and, in a rare moment of introspection, acknowledges she can't keep one because she's always put her movie career ahead of her personal life.

It takes Robin Aronson awhile to warm up to her Masha characterization, but once she does, she makes the audience cringe at her vanity, then sympathize with her vulnerability. The same is true for Correll Barca-Hall as Spike. At first he's just another pretty face, but later demonstrates real acting chops (and some impressive exercise moves). Spike likes to strip down to next-to-nothing in just about every scene, and the one in which he does pushups and a back flip is mind-boggling.

Add to this mix Cassandra (Ashley Sue Perry), the family housekeeper who has a proclivity for making wild, sometimes-unintelligible prophecies that often come true, and Nina (soft-spoken Sasha Voight), a dewy-eyed 17-year-old visiting her relatives next door who's awed to meet a movie star and somewhat smitten by Spike. (Later, she gets off one of the play's best lines when she confides to Vanya, “He's awfully attractive, except for his personality of course.”)

Perry is strong as the prediction-spewing Cassandra, never more so than in Act 2's voodoo-doll scene. Though she's supposed to clean, she spends most of her time shouting dire warnings. Interestingly, she has a Hispanic accent whenever she's making a prediction, but it's pretty much nonexistent other times.

Masha returned home because she's been invited to a nearby costume party and has had her personal assistant create costumes for her siblings and Spike. Naturally she's Disney's Snow White, Spike's her Prince Charming and she expects Vanya and Sonia to be dwarfs. But Sonia gets her revenge by instead buying a glamorous gown and going as the Evil Queen – actually Maggie Smith's interpretation of that character.

It is Sonia's finest hour, and Troxell makes the most of it. She is absolutely captivating in the scene where she finally extracts a little payback on her imperious sister.

After the party, Sonia is still giddy from the attention she got in her flashy dress (thanks to costume designer Helen S.) while Masha pouts that her Snow White outfit wasn't even recognized at the party. “They thought I was Little Bo Peep or a Hummel figure,” she peevishly whimpers.

At play's end it's Whisler's turn to command notice. Vanya, Nina and Sonia read from a play he's writing about a molecule. But he goes unhinged when he sees Spike texting. The meandering monologue that follows is touching, heartbreaking, caring – and much more. Bemoaning today's technology, Vanya murmurs, “There are no shared memories anymore. I miss the past, and I'm worried about the future.”

Wow! Who knew Durang could be so deliciously insightful?

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