VANYA and SONIA and MASHA and SPIKE

by CHRISTOPHER DURANG

2014 2015

ARIZONA THEATRE COMPANY THE STATE THEATRE
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ABOUT ATC

Arizona Theatre Company is a professional, not-for-profit theatre company. This means all of our artists, administrators and production staff are paid professionals, and the income we receive from ticket sales and contributions goes right back into our budget to create our work, rather than to any particular person as a profit.

Each season, ATC employs hundreds of actors, directors and designers from all over the country to create the work you see on stage. In addition, ATC currently employs about 100 staff members in our production shops and administrative offices in Tucson and Phoenix during our season. Among these people are carpenters, painters, marketing professionals, fundraisers, stage directors, computer specialists, sound and light board operators, tailors, costume designers, box office agents, stage crew – the list is endless – representing an amazing range of talents and skills.

We are also supported by a Board of Trustees, a group of business and community leaders who volunteer their time and expertise to assist the theatre in financial and legal matters, advise in marketing and fundraising, and help represent the theatre in our community.

Roughly 150,000 people attend our shows every year, and several thousand of those people support us with charitable contributions in addition to purchasing their tickets. Businesses large and small, private foundations and the city and state governments also support our work financially.

All of this is in support of our vision and mission:

OUR VISION IS TO TOUCH LIVES THROUGH THE POWER OF THEATRE.

Our mission is to create professional theatre that continually strives to reach new levels of artistic excellence and that resonates locally, in the state of Arizona and throughout the nation. In order to fulfill our mission, the theatre produces a broad repertoire ranging from classics to new works, engages artists of the highest caliber, and is committed to assuring access to the broadest spectrum of citizens.
INTRODUCTION TO THE PLAY

Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike
By Christopher Durang
Directed by Joel Sass

WINNER OF THE 2013 TONY AWARD FOR BEST PLAY

In rural Bucks County, PA, Vanya and Sonia have frittered their lives away in their family’s farmhouse full of regret, angst and the alarmingly ambiguous prophecies of their housekeeper. Enter their sister, self-absorbed movie star Masha, and the stage is set for an absurd weekend of hilarity and global warming. This Broadway sensation delights audiences with abundant comic twists!

Suzanne Warmanen, Isabell Monk O’Connor and Charles Janasz in Arizona Theatre Company’s Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike. Photo by Joan Marcus.

MEET THE CHARACTERS

VANYA takes his name from the title character of Anton Chekhov’s Uncle Vanya, the aging caretaker of his brother’s estate. Obsessing over the lost opportunities of his long and stagnant life, Chekhov’s Vanya represents the cost of a world in social flux, the forgotten remnant of a social order supplanted and alienated by impending modernization. Durang’s Vanya shares that same distance from the fast pace of urbanity, but is a much more genial version of Chekhov’s depressed and somewhat violent creation. Vanya also shares roots with Konstantin of Chekhov’s first play, The Seagull, whose play-within-the-play is performed by the neighbor girl, Nina, the object of his unrequited affections.
CHRISTOPHER DURANG (playwright) grew up in New Jersey, the only child of charismatic but troubled parents. His interest in theater was encouraged by his parents, and he attended many performances as a child. He wrote his first play as a second-grader, an adaptation of an *I Love Lucy* episode. When his mother told his teacher about it, his class at Lady of Peace Catholic School performed the two-page play.

Durang attended the Delbarton School from seventh to twelfth grade and, much to his surprise, was accepted at Harvard, which he attended hoping to become a well-rounded writer. His college years were marked by a deep depression that lasted from the end of his freshman year to the summer after his junior year. He was dealing with the divorce of his parents, his father’s alcoholism, the guilt of having to testify against his father in court, his disillusionment with the Catholic Church, and his realization that he was gay. By his senior year, Durang’s depression lifted in part because he was selected to be one of 15 people to attend William Alfred’s playwriting class.

Following college, he attended the Yale School of Drama, where he continued to write and perform. Among his classmates were Sigourney Weaver, Wendy Wasserstein, Meryl Streep and Albert Innaurato. Yale provided an environment in which he thrived, experimentating and taking risks in his writing. Shortly after he graduated, he scored a great coup in having his play *The Idiots Karamazov*, written with Innaurato, performed at Yale Repertory Theatre.

Among Durang’s best-known plays are *A History of the American Film*, *The Actor’s Nightmare*, *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You*, *Beyond Therapy*, *Baby with the Bathwater*, *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*, *Laughing Wild*, and *Durang Durang* (an evening of six plays, including the Tennessee Williams parody *For Whom the Southern Belle Tolls*).
In the early 1980s, Durang and Sigourney Weaver co-wrote and performed their acclaimed Brecht-Weill parody Das Lusitania Songspiel and were both nominated for Drama Desk Awards for Best Performer in a Musical. In 1993, he performed alongside Julie Andrews in the five-person off-Broadway Sondheim revue Putting It Together. He also played a singing congressman in Call Me Madam with Tyne Daly as part of the New York City Center’s “Encore!”

In 1996, he was commissioned by the Rodgers and Hammerstein Foundation to write a book for Babes in Arms and the same year Sex and Longing opened on Broadway, starring Weaver. Additional recent plays include Betty’s Summer Vacation, the musical Adrift in Macao, with music by Peter Melnick, Mrs. Bob Cratchit’s Wild Christmas Binge and Why Torture is Wrong, and the People Who Love Them. Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike was commissioned and originally produced by the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, N.J., before the production moved to Broadway, where it won the 2013 Tony Award for Best Play.

For the past two decades, Durang has co-chaired, with Marsha Norman, the Playwriting Program at the Juilliard School in Manhattan. He has lived for 23 years in a farmhouse on a hill in Bucks County, Penn., with his partner John Augustine.

— Originally created for the Guthrie Theater’s production of Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike by dramaturg Carla Steen, with assistance from Karli Kolbert.

ANTON CHEKHOV

ANTON CHEKHOV (playwright) was born in 1860 in the town of Taganrog, a port city on the Sea of Azov, in Southern Russia. He experienced a difficult childhood at the hands of an emotionally and physically abusive father. In 1876, Chekhov’s father was declared bankrupt and fled with the family to Moscow to avoid debtor’s prison, leaving Chekhov behind to sell their possessions in Taganrog and finish his education.

Chekhov sold their family home to cover their debts – just as he wrote in The Cherry Orchard – and worked odd jobs to pay for his education, spending time as a private tutor, a catcher and seller of goldfinches, and as a writer of short sketches for various newspapers. In 1879 he was admitted to medical school in Moscow, rejoining his family and taking charge of their well-being.

After his graduation from medical school in 1884, Chekhov continued to write to support himself and his family. Though he considered his work as a physician to be his primary profession, he made little money as a doctor, instead caring for the poor free of charge. He began to gain attention for his writing from both a literary and popular audience, winning the coveted Pushkin Prize in 1887 for his collection of short stories, At Dusk (V Sumerkakh), designated the year’s “best literary production distinguished by high artistic worth.” In autumn of that same year, Chekhov was commissioned to write his first play, Ivanov (1887), which was praised as a success, much to Chekhov’s amusement.

In 1889, Chekhov experienced an intense period of restlessness and depression after the death of his brother, Nikolay, from tuberculosis. Searching for his own sense of purpose, Chekhov obsessively took up the cause of prison reform, publishing his first-hand studies in the mid-1890s.

Chekhov purchased a small country estate to the south of Moscow in 1892, where he lived with his family and donated his time as a physician, despite frequent recurrences of his own tuberculosis, which he had long attempted to deny. It was at this estate that he wrote The Seagull (1896), which premiered at the Alexandrinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg to an abysmal reception, leading Chekhov to renounce his ambitions as a playwright. However, the play impressed director Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, who convinced Constantin Stanislavski to direct it for the innovative Moscow Art Theatre in 1898. Thus began one of the most impactful relationships in the history of the contemporary theatre, as Stanislavski’s token attention to psychological realism and ensemble acting brought out the intricate subtleties of Chekhov’s text, and a new era of theatrical performance was born.
The Moscow Art Theatre commissioned more plays from Chekhov, staging the premiere of *Uncle Vanya* in 1899. That same year, having been officially diagnosed with tuberculosis, Chekhov moved to the outskirts of Yalta with his mother and sister after his father’s death. While there he completed two more plays – *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard* – both on commission from the Moscow Art Theatre.

In 1901, Chekhov quietly married Olga Knipper, a former protégée and lover of Nemirovich-Danchenko’s, whom he had met during rehearsals for *The Seagull* three years earlier. They spent most of their married life apart, Chekhov in Yalta and Olga in Moscow, while she pursued her career as an actress.

By the spring of 1904, Chekhov’s tuberculosis had progressed to the terminal stage, and he died in early July. His body was transported by train – in a car labeled, “For oysters” – and was buried next to his father at the Novodevichy Cemetery in Moscow.

**A BRIEF OVERVIEW**

Anton Chekhov, the iconic figure of dramatic writing as we tend to think of him today, can be a daunting figure to grapple with and contextualize. Rather than send our audience members on what could be a lifetime of reading, study, and contemplation, here is a brief overview of Chekhov’s work, style, and his impact on the contemporary theatrical experience.

Chekhov wrote four major dramatic works in his lifetime: *The Seagull* (1896), *Uncle Vanya* (1897), *Three Sisters* (1901), and *The Cherry Orchard* (1904). He is also considered one of the greatest writers of short stories in world history.

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

The Russia of Chekhov’s lifetime was very much aware of social change and its place in a transitioning world – as well as the anxiety and hope that accompanies such changes – as are the characters that populate his plays. The late 19th century and the Industrial Revolution brought about urbanization and the implementation of the railroad, opening the geographical world in a way that had never been actualized before.

Rapid historical change also manifested in a new political order, borne out of years of increasing demand for political reform. When Tsar Alexander II took the Russian throne in 1855, the demand for the abolition of serfdom was peaking, leading him to abolish the practice in 1861 along with many other major governmental reforms throughout his reign. The nihilist movement of the 1860s favored further reform of the Russian establishment in favor of the destruction of corruptible governmental institutions and laws. Radical revolutionaries known as the Narodniks emerged, inspiring anarchism and terrorism, and assassinating the tsar in 1881, when Alexander III ascended to the throne.

Alexander III’s reign is noted for its reactionary agenda, and for reviving an earlier anti-democratic, pro-aristocratic ideology, leading to a resurgence of revolutionary agendas in the 1890s. Chekhov offers literary premonitions of the massive upheaval about to be sparked in the early 1900s, when the old aristocratic order would give way with the overthrow of the tsarist system in 1917, the subsequent Russian Revolution, and the eventual rise of the Soviet Union.
COMEDY

Chekhov considered most of his work to be comedy, defined in the traditional sense of dramatic structure. Derived from the tenets of tragic form laid out in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, comedy by definition is concerned with the “worthless” or “valueless” – the Greek word is *phaulos* – meaning action that is commonplace or lacking in a certain magnitude. This is precisely what Chekhov does through his descriptions of common, everyday people, and his examinations of mere moments in their lives.

Thinking of Chekhov’s work as comedy can be confusing for a modern audience, who often associates the word with a laugh-out-loud kind of humor. Interestingly enough, some scholars argue that this ideological shift in definition can be traced back to an anonymous piece known as the *Coislinian Tractate*, written sometime before the first century B.C., that equates comedy to pleasure and laughter and the sense of catharsis that they bring.

Durang’s *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike* bridges the two definitions of comedy, illuminating the commonplace actions of his characters amidst the laughter of his audience.

NATURALISM

Chekhov believed that the role of the writer and the artist was to capture common reality as it actually is, and that people live their lives in small, simple moments rather than in the grand gestures and declarations that were prevalent in theatre at the time.

“After all, in real life, people don’t spend every moment in shooting one another, hanging themselves, or making declarations. They do not spend all their time saying clever things. They are more occupied with eating, drinking, flirting, and saying stupidities... Let everything on the stage be just as complicated, and at the same time just as simple, as in life. People eat their dinner, just eat their dinner, and all the time their happiness is taking form, or their lives are being destroyed.”

– Anton Chekhov

His detailed descriptions of small fragments – moments – of his characters’ lives coincide with the rise of naturalism, which emerged in reaction to the realist movement that dominated the second half of the 19th century. By the 1880s the Russian realistic novel, which attempted to communicate the broad expanse of life as a whole, had given way to the “slice of life” ambitions of the naturalists (as well as the allusions of the symbolists, a designation also occasionally assigned to Chekhov). The ephemeral moment slipped into literary focus, and was paralleled in the visual art world with the introduction of Impressionism, which gives the impression of a snapshot: just a small part of a larger reality.

THEMES

There are a few basic, recurring themes throughout the works of Anton Chekhov that were revolutionary in their appearance upon the stage, and yet are commonplace examples of what we, as people, experience in some measure in each of our lives.

**ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES:** Much of the action of Chekhov’s plays revolves around the disruption of normalcy brought about by the arrival and departure of people, and how their presence or absence affects the lives of the rest of the characters.

**RELATIONSHIPS:** Chekhov revolutionized the concept of character in dramatic literature by portraying common people as worthwhile characters. He also “democratized” the stage by allowing each of his characters to have their own, detailed story, rather than identifying a single hero with a cast of less-dimensional, supporting figures.
YEARNING, WITH NO RESOLUTION: Most of the characters in Chekhov's plays want something desperately, whether it is love that goes unrequited, the dream of a better life in Moscow, or the desire to regain years of wasted time. What is unique about Chekhov is the absence of any neat resolutions; what the characters want at the beginning of the play, they generally still yearn for at the end.

STRUCTURE

Chekhov is known as a master of dramatic structure, and was a key innovator in the theatrical revolution that took place at the end of the 19th century. He rebelled against the “well-made play,” a formal structure delineated by Eugene Scribe and developed by Victorien Sardou earlier in the century that would come to be identified as the traditional model of a “good” play. A good play seemed to Chekhov to have little relation to real life, and he scorned the melodrama and farce of popular culture.

In Chekhov’s plays there are no neatly packaged endings, and no single hero that carries the action forward or arrives to save the day; life is messy, nuanced, and lived in the moment.

THE STANISLAVSKI SYSTEM

Chekhov’s unique construction of character gave every character – and every actor – their own story and objectives to pursue, even while only providing the details of a small portion or a single occurrence in his characters’ lives. The dramaturgical playground Chekhov created with his words provided the perfect opportunity for Russian director Constantin Stanislavski, a co-founder of the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT), to layer in his particular talent for creating vivid stage images out of selected, significant details.

Stanislavski’s 1898 production of *The Seagull*, co-directed with MAT co-founder Nemirovich-Danchenko, was described as “one of the greatest events in the history of Russian theatre and one of the greatest new developments in the history of world drama.” (The theatre still bears the seagull as its emblem today.) Stanislavski and Chekhov would continue their relationship through the premieres of all of Chekhov’s other major plays: *Uncle Vanya* in 1899, *Three Sisters* in 1901, and *The Cherry Orchard* in 1904.

Stanislavski’s psychological and ensemble-based approach, combined with Chekhov’s unwillingness to expand the text of his scripts, forced Stanislavski to break theatrical and acting traditions, and led to the creation of his systemic approach to acting that is still a major component of contemporary actor training.

Stanislavski’s system of acting was designed to provide a universally applicable approach that could be useful to actors of all genres. It consists of a combination of emotional memory and imagination, observation, dramatic analysis, and physical actions that allow access to the subconscious through the conscious, to arrive at a point of artistic truth on the stage.

Stanislavski’s holistic, psychophysical theory of acting provided the building blocks for numerous other theories of acting technique. His system was adapted in part to create Lee Strasberg’s Method approach, which relies exclusively on psychological techniques, and again by Stella Adler, who created an American adaptation that also focuses on the inner and outer sources of experience to build a character. In turn, the Meisner technique, which consists of a series of interdependent training exercises, emerged from the combined teachings of Strasberg and Adler. When combined, these approaches to actor training form the base of the American acting tradition as we know it today.

REFERENCES AND GLOSSARY

*Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike* includes a number of regional and pop culture (and high culture) references throughout the play. Included here are some of the highlights.

THE RELUCTANT DEBUTANTE

1955 light comedy by British playwright William Douglas-Home, in which a mother mistakenly sets up her debutante daughter on a date with a reported philanderer.
THE ORESTEIA
A trilogy of tragedies by Aeschylus about the return home from Troy of the Greek king Agamemnon, his murder by his wife Clytemnestra and her lover, Clytemnestra's murder by her children Electra and Orestes, and Orestes’ trial before Athenian citizens.

THE IMAGINARY INVALID
1673 comedy by French playwright Molière, who wrote the play as he was ill, and collapsed and died playing the lead role, that of a hypochondriac.

DOROTHY PARKER
Witty American writer and poet (1893-1967), who became known as one of the best and most intelligent conversationalists in New York. In 1936, she and her husband bought a farmhouse and 120 acres in Bucks County, renovated it and lived there part-time for the better part of 20 years.

CALIFORNIA SUITE
1978 film written by Neil Simon that follows five couples who are staying at the same California hotel at the same time. Maggie Smith and Michael Caine’s characters are visiting from Britain for the Academy Awards, for which Smith’s character has been nominated. The film also stars Jane Fonda, Alan Alda, Walter Matthau, Elaine May, Bill Cosby and Richard Pryor.

THE WAWA
Chain of convenience store/fuel stations that traces its history back to a small dairy processing plant in Wawa, Penn., in the early 20th century.

SMILES OF A SUMMER NIGHT
1955 Swedish romantic comedy-drama directed by Ingmar Bergman. Lawyer Fredrik Egerman, his young second wife and his grown son spend a weekend in the country with Fredrik’s old flame Desiree, her lover and his wife.

BERKS AND MONTGOMERY COUNTIES
Counties to the west and southwest of Bucks County in southeastern Pennsylvania.

UPPER BLACK EDDY
Unincorporated village in north Bucks County, on the Delaware River across from New Jersey. The name’s origins are from the Black family who operated a hotel there.

THE BISHOP SHEEN SHOW
Life is Worth Living was a TV program led by Catholic Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, airing for six years starting in 1952, first on the DuMont Television Network then on ABC.
SEÑOR WENCES

Spanish ventriloquist Wenceslao Moreno (1896–1999). With makeup and a wig, he transformed his thumb and forefinger into the impertinent boy character Johnny. He also created Pedro, a talking head in a box who, when asked “You all right?” would respond “S’all right.”

DAVY CROCKETT AND HIS COONSKIN CAP

Legendary figure of the American frontier, Davy Crockett (1786–1836) died at the Alamo. His tall tales dating from the 1830s inspired the Hollywood versions in the mid-20th century, including the 1955 movie Davy Crockett: King of the Wild Frontier, starring Fess Parker as Davy. Coonskin caps became a huge fad among boys in the U.S. in the mid-1950s.

THE MICKEY MOUSE CLUB

TV show produced by Disney from 1955–58. It starred child Mouseketeers and featured serials within the show, such as The Hardy Boys, which starred Tommy Kirk and Tim Considine as Joe and Frank Hardy.

VOODOO

Religion derived from African polytheism and ancestor worship practiced chiefly in Haiti, but a Louisiana strain introduced voodoo dolls, gris-gris, voodoo queens and other practices unique to American culture.

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