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“More than anything else, though, it is Chekhov’s great sufficiency that moves us and makes us admire; our reader’s awareness that story to story, degree by degree around the sphere of observable human existence, Chekhov’s measure is perfect. Given the subjects, the characters, the actions he brings into play, we routinely feel that everything of importance is always there in Chekhov.”

(Richard Ford, Tales of Chekhov).

Bucks County, Pennsylvania

**Setting**

**Characters**

**VANYA** – 50s, living in Bucks County. Resigned to his life, more or less, at least compared to Sonia.

**SONIA** – his step sister, early 50s, living with him in Bucks County. Discontent, upset, regretful.

**MASHA** – his sister, 50s, glamorous and successful actress who goes gallivanting around the world.

**SPIKE** – an aspiring actor, 29, sexy, self-absorbed, Masha’s new companion.

**NINA** – lovely, sincere would be actress, 20s, visiting her aunt and uncle next door. Star struck and energetic.

**CASSANDRA** – cleaning lady and soothsayer, any age, probably African.

His most recent works are *Mrs. Bob Cratchit’s Wild Christmas Binge*, which premiered at City Theatre in Pittsburgh in 2002. And the musical *Adrift in Macao*, with music by Peter Melnick and book and lyrics by Durang, which premiered at New York Stage and Film in summer 2002, and is under option for off-Broadway 2003-04.

Durang is also a performer, and acted with E. Katherine Kerr in the N.Y. premiere of *Laughing Wild*, and with Jean Smart in the L.A. production. He shared in an acting ensemble Obie for *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*; and with John Augustine and Sherry Anderson has performed his crackpot cabaret *Chris Durang and Dawne* at the Criterion Center, Caroline’s Comedy Club, Williamstown Summer Cabaret, and the Triad, winning a 1996 Bistro Award.

In the early 80s, he and Sigourney Weaver co-wrote and performed in 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 sang in the five person off-Broadway Sondheim revue, *Putting It Together*, with Julie Andrews at the Manhattan Theatre Club. And he played a singing Congressman in the Encores presentation of *Call Me Madam* with Tyne Daly at City Center.

In movies, he has appeared in *The Secret of My Success*, *Mr. North, The Butcher’s Wife*, *Housesitter*, and *The Cowboy Way*, among others.

He has a B.A. from Harvard College, and an M.F.A. in Playwriting from Yale School of Drama.

In 1995 he won the prestigious three-year Lila Wallace Readers Digest Writers Award; as part of his grant, he ran a writing workshop for adult children of alcoholics. In 2000 he won the Sidney Kingsley Playwriting Award.

Grove Press publishes several of his plays. Smith and Kraus recently published two new collections: *Christopher Durang: 27 Short Plays* and *Christopher Durang: Complete Full-Length Plays* (1975-1995). Grove has recently published Betty’s Summer Vacation.

Since 1994 he has been co-chair with Marsha Norman of the Playwriting Program at the Juilliard School in Manhattan.

He is a member of the Dramatists Guild Council.
Anton Chekhov: Biography

by Paul J. Susi

Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike is, in many ways, an homage to Russian playwright, writer, physician and dramaturg Anton Chekhov.

Widely recognized as one of the most influential writers in modern history, Anton Chekhov was born on 29 January, 1860, to a grocery store owner in Taganrog, in southern Russia. The third of six children, Chekhov experienced extreme poverty in his adolescence, when his father’s store failed and declared bankruptcy. He began writing humorous stories in his letters to his family as a means of cheering them up. This developed into a critically needed income, as he soon began selling his writings to Russian newspapers. While working his way through medical school, Chekhov soon became one of the most prolific satirists of his time, writing social critiques of ordinary Russian life in cities and villages on a daily basis. His sketches, vignettes and stories attracted recognition and praise from critics and fellow writers, including Leo Tolstoy. Chekhov won the prestigious Pushkin Prize for his short story collection “At Dusk” in 1887.

His first major play, “Ivanov,” was commissioned that same year. Chekhov had a tumultuous relationship with the theater of the day, experiencing both praise and scorn from his audiences. The Moscow Art Theater under Constantin Stanislavski particularly embraced his work, commissioning “Uncle Vanya,” “The Cherry Orchard” and “Three Sisters.” Together with “The Seagull” (a particular failure at its 1896 debut), Chekhov’s plays continue to be widely performed and studied to this day.

Chekhov’s writing achieved lasting international appeal by exploring psychological depth and subtext to a degree unprecedented in his time, proving deeply humane and biting perceptively of social class issues and individual relationship dynamics. Though he wrote about issues and in a vernacular specific to his social and economic context, international audiences continue to respond to the universality of the emotional truths he expressed, and the wry, frequently underestimated humor. Through techniques pioneered by Stanislavski, generations of actors, playwrights and directors have used Chekhov’s plays as touchstones in the tradition of naturalistic, psychologically truthful acting and movingly efficient writing.

After a long and recurring struggle with tuberculosis, Anton Chekhov died on 15 July 1904.

The Plays of Anton Chekhov

UNCLE VANYA – Vanya and his niece Sonya work their small country estate, living frugally and keeping their emotions tightly reined in. The return of Vanya’s brother-in-law with his beautiful second wife Elena unlocks hidden passions as the entire family is turned upside down. Tea, wine and vodka fuel the tensions in this tragicomic story about unrequited love, thwarted ambition and enduring hope.

via http://www.guthrietheater.org/plays_events/plays/uncle_vanya

THE CHERRY ORCHARD – Anya and her governess, Charlotta, have gone to Paris to bring Anya’s mother, Madame Ranevsky, back home. They return home to find that their family estate is about to be sold at auction for debt. To all the family it is quite unthinkable that they should lose the wonderful cherry orchard whose white blossoms are part of their childhood memories. Madame Ranevsky is an irresponsible soul who cannot be made to realize the value of money. Her brother, Gaev, is just as hopeless where money is concerned. Varya, the step-daughter, is the only practical one, but how could she raise enough money by herself?

Credit to Northeastern Illinois University

THREE SISTERS – Sisters Olga, Masha, and Irina live in a provincial Russian town with their younger brother, Andre. The siblings have wildly different personalities, yet each is confronted with choices faced by all young people. Master playwright Anton Chekhov shares their aspirations, obsessions, loves, and lusts. We follow the family from birthday parties to an anticipated wedding; from catastrophes to seasonal parties - and through their lives we share their dreams and disappointments

via http://www.ardenttheatre.org/2014/threesisters.html

THE SEAGULL – Celebrated actress Irina Arkadina’s visit to her aspiring playwright son with her successful novelist lover in tow kindles unrequited passions and petty jealousies in Anton Chekhov’s masterpiece about love, missed connections, and what it means to be an artist.

via http://www.huntingtontheatre.org/season/2013-2014/seagull
Correlations from Chekhov to Durang

“It takes Chekhov themes and characters and mixes them all up, as if I’ve put them into a comic blender”
– Christopher Durang

VANYA – 50s, living in Bucks County. Resigned to his life, more or less, at least compared to Sonia.

• Gayev (Cherry Orchard) the brother of Madame Ranevskaya and a talkative eccentric. Gayev tries hard to save his family and estate, but ultimately, as an aristocrat, lacks the drive. He is fifty-one years old, but as he notes, this is “difficult to believe”, because he is in many ways an infant.

• Vanya (Uncle Vanya) a bitter, broken man who has wasted his life toiling on the estate of his brother-in-law, Serebryakov. He is consumed with his lost life and obsessed with what might have been.

• Konstantin (The Seagull) Struggles to find his voice as a writer in the shadow of his successful actress mother. Treplev is a dreamer and a compassionate soul who fills the void of affection in his life with self-doubt.

• Sorin (The Seagull) - Landowner of the estate where the play takes place. A patient listener, a confidant, he is disappointed with his life’s decisions and outcome. He once wished to find love and be a successful writer and never acquired either wish.

ROLE PLAYED BY: Andrew Sellon in his PCS debut. Andrew recently played this role at Asolo Rep – Florida’s largest equity theater – and the production ended up being one of the biggest hits of the company’s 50+ years. www.andrewsellon.com

SONIA – Vanya’s adopted sister, early 50s, living with him in Bucks County. Discontent, upset, regretful

• Varya (Cherry Orchard) Ranevskys adopted daughter manages the estate and keeps everything in order. Hard-working and responsible, she is also something of a cry-baby, often in tears; but this may reflect her sense of powerlessness, as she is the one character in the play who may be most affected by the loss of the estate.

• Sonya (Uncle Vanya) Gentle but homely, she has steadfastly given herself to the maintenance of the estate. Suffers from the awareness of her own lack of beauty and from her unrequited feelings for Dr. Astrov.

• Masha (The Seagull) She wears all black all of the time because she is depressed and hates her life. She feels sorry for herself and gives in to disappointments, surviving the unfulfilled dreams with the hope of change and renewal in moving and forgetting.

ROLE PLAYED BY: Sharonlee McLean in her 23rd production at PCS! Most recently, Sharonlee played the typographer in The Typographer’s Dream and Yente/Grandma Tzeitel in Fiddler on the Roof, a role that earned her a PAMTA Award nomination.

MASHA – Vanya’s sister, 50s, glamorous and successful actress who goes gallivanting around the world.

• Irina Arkadina (Seagull) a renowned actress who loves attention and is not afraid to ask for it. Her competitive spirit selfishly discourages other characters’ creative spirit. obsessed with looking and feeling young.

• Madame Renevsky (Cherry Orchard) The middle-aged owner of the estate. Kind and generous. A woman of great physical beauty with a young lover. Lives in both Paris and in Russia.

ROLE PLAYED BY: Carol Halstead is familiar to PCS audiences as the shoe-loving Haley in Bad Dates, Olivia in Twelfth Night and Queen Elizabeth in The Beard of Avon at PCS. She appeared on Broadway in Gore Vidal’s The Best Man, among many other credits.
Correlations from Chekhov to Durang Cont...

SPIKE – An aspiring actor, 29, sexy, self-absorbed, Masha’s new companion

• Yelena (Uncle Vanya) The professor’s beautiful wife, fascinates all the characters of the play, causing them to abandon their duties and fall into idleness

• Boris Trigorin (The Seagull) He begins as a dutiful lover to Arkadina but becomes tempted by the youthful beauty, optimism, and flattery of Nina. Trigorin’s favorite hobby is fishing.

• Yasha (The Cherry Orchard) – young manservant. He is strongly implied to be Madame Ranevsky’s lover.

ROLE PLAYED BY: Nick Ballard in his PCS debut. Nick lives in Los Angeles where his favorite recent performances include Dog Sees God (GLAAD Media Award/Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle/LA Weekly nominations) and Anita Bryant Died For Your Sins (GLAAD Media Award nomination). His TV credits include Days of Our Lives, Holliston, MTV’s Happyland, Bones and 90210.

CASSANDRA – Cleaning lady and soothsayer, any age.

• Marina (Uncle Vanya) Marina is a kind, elderly, and devout nurse. Apparently finding a beneficent sense of order in the monotonous life of the estate, she resents the disruption of routine that the others have brought to the household. She delivers religious platitudes throughout the play and offers comfort to a number of characters

ROLE PLAYED BY: Olivia Negron in her PCS debut. Her Broadway credits include Cuba and His Teddy Bear with Robert De Niro and Serious Money with Alec Baldwin. Her Off-Broadway credits include Circle Repertory, La MaMa, Henry Street Settlement, HB Studios, TheatreSource and Women’s Interart, along with many regional stages, and TV and film credits.

NINA – Lovely, sincere would be actress, 20s. Visiting her aunt and uncle next door. Star-struck and energetic.

• Nina (The Seagull) Nina is a nineteen-year-old neighbor of Sorin’s estate who grew up in an estate bordering the same lake that acts as a backdrop for the play. Nina is in love with Treplev or perhaps in love with the idea that Treplev can bring her close to his mother, an actress, which is what Nina wants to become. Naïve, smart, idealistic, and willing to take risks, Nina is a hopeless romantic who longs for a stage career.

ROLE PLAYED BY: Eden Malyn in her PCS debut. Look out for her recurring role as Erin Sikowitz in season three of the Netflix original, Orange is the New Black this spring, as well as a starring role in the new indie feature Maybe Someday.
A View from the Country: Christopher Durang on Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike

It's safe to say that *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike* is one of the hottest plays on American stages this season. After winning the 2013 Tony Award for Best New Play – along with a Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Play and the New York Drama Critic's Circle Award – it quickly became the most-produced new play in America this season. During one of the many recent productions on stages across the country, playwright Christopher Durang sat down with dramaturg Danielle Mages Amato to muse about his new hit play:

**WHERE DID THE IDEA BEHIND THIS PLAY COME FROM? WHY CHEKHOV?**

I lived in New York for 22 years, and in 1996, with my partner John Augustine, I moved to Bucks County, Pennsylvania. We live on a little hill, overlooking a pond, and a blue heron does come there. My house, it's a farmhouse, pretty and a little quaint, and it made me think of the Chekhov plays, like *The Seagull* and *Uncle Vanya*, where the people who live in the country are rather unhappy. They feel that their lives are boring; there's no stimulation for them. Then there are characters like the glamorous actress Madame Arkadina in *The Seagull*, who are wandering about living in cities and being in plays and having affairs. I suddenly realized that I was now the age of the older characters in Chekhov. I'd mostly seen and read the plays in my 20s and 30s, and I certainly had empathy for the older characters, but they felt very distant from my experience. And now I thought, “Oh my gosh, I'm the same age as Uncle Vanya.” (Actually, I went back and looked up how old Vanya is in the play, and he's 47! I'm a lot older than that. But aging was different back then, and most of the great actors who've played that role are older.) Even though I was now the age of Chekhov's older characters, and I lived in a place in the country, I realized that I didn't feel bitter in the way that the Chekhov characters did—I'd been in the city, and I actually wanted to get out of the city. But I thought to myself: what if I had only gone away from home briefly, and I hadn't pursued the things that interested me? What if my fictional sister and I had ended up taking care of our parents through a very prolonged illness, and so on. I realized it was a “what if” play.

**WHAT IF YOU, YOURSELF, HAD BEEN A CHARACTER IN A CHEKHOV PLAY?**

Yes—what if my real life had been like one of those Chekhov characters. Chekhov was a definite jumping-off point for the play, but it's very much not a parody of Chekhov. I've done parodies in the past, and this is much more its own thing. And I did my very best to write it so that you don't have to know Chekhov to respond to it. I thought I was going to have much more about unrequited love, which is a theme that comes up in Chekhov so much. But it became much more about disappointment with how your life has gone. That's a theme that isn't unique to Chekhov. And it doesn't sound like a comedy at all. But it is a comedy!

**COULD YOU TELL US A BIT ABOUT THE PAROIDS YOU'VE WRITTEN?**

Well, I wrote *For Whom the Southern Belle Tolls*, which is a parody of *The Glass Menagerie*. It follows the original play very closely, except that Laura has become Laurence, who is a hypochondriac, which drives his mother crazy, and instead of having a glass menagerie, he has a collection of glass cocktail stirrers, and he gives them all different names. There's another one, less well known, called *Desire, Desire, Desire*, which was mostly about Stanley and Blanche from *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In that one, Stella has gone out to get a Lemon Coke and she hasn't been back for eight years. I did a parody of *A Lie of the Mind* by Sam Shepard, and a very little-known parody of *Aunt Dan and Lemon*, but the longest of my parodies is maybe 30 minutes. I don't know that I've ever seen a parody that sustains for a full-length play. With *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike*, I was afraid that, because of the title, people might assume it's a parody. But the parodies I've written are correctly called parodies. This is inspired by Chekhov, but it's its own thing.

**ARE YOU A PERSON WHO SEES THE WORK YOU'VE DONE OVER THE COURSE OF YOUR CAREER AS ONE LONG TRAJECTORY, OR DO YOU SEE IT IN PHASES? HOW DOES VANYA AND SONIA AND MASHA AND SPIKE RELATE TO YOUR OTHER PLAYS?**

I see it in phases, but that's hindsight, because I can look back on it. In high school I wrote conventional musical comedies, and our school performed them, and it was a fun learning experience. Shortly before I applied to college, I got more serious about reading plays and seeing foreign movies, and I was very inspired by the phrase: “Theatre of the Absurd.” So until maybe the middle of my years at Yale Drama School, I wrote absurdist plays, very non-realistic comedies.
I think *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You* was my first play that included anything unabashedly serious. There’s a section where Diane (the one who tries to kill Sister) talks about the death of her mother. It was actually based on the death of my mother, which had happened maybe a year before. And I remember when I was writing it, thinking, “Oh dear, will the audience want to hear this?” When I was writing all those absurdist things, I didn’t realize I was writing about my family. But when I looked back, I saw the connections. *The Marriage of Bette and Boo* (1985) was based on my parents’s marriage, and the character of Matt is pretty much me. I fictionalized some of the relatives, but some of them are not entirely fictionalized! Having written that play, I felt like I’d finished with that. It wasn’t a conscious thought— but I was able to move on.

When I got to *Betty’s Summer Vacation*, which was 1999, some kind of shift happened for me as a writer, and I think of *Betty’s Summer Vacation, Miss Witherspoon, Why Torture Is Wrong, and the People Who Love Them*, and *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike* as connected. I think most writers don’t ever get away from writing about families, but none of those plays were really triggered by specifics of my family—at that point I’d gotten old enough that I’d had my own experiences—and instead, they all seemed to focus around a central theme. In *Betty’s Summer Vacation*, the theme became this weird American interest in watching distressing things on television: Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas, the Menendez Brothers’s trial—anything on Court TV. *Why Torture Is Wrong* was a reaction to the Bush years and the redefinition of torture that happened during that time. That might sound pretty serious, but to the audience, the plays come off as funny.

**FROM YOUR PERSPECTIVE, AS SOMEONE WHO WRITES ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY COMEDIES, DO YOU THINK THAT COMEDY IS SOMETHING THAT WE NEED? AS HUMAN BEINGS, AS A SOCIETY?**

Oh yes, absolutely. Comedies give you pleasure. And over the course of my life, when I’ve gotten down, I’ve often put on a comedy to help me get through. There’s also something about laughter that comes from things that you recognize. For instance, the bickering of the siblings in my play is funny. You could write it so it would be hellish, and that might be good, too— it would be intense, more like Edward Albee or Eugene O’Neill. But I think we need both. For two years in college, I was in a deep, deep depression—I couldn’t function well as a student or as a person. During that time, I hardly ever watched comedies. I found that I had a hard time responding to things if they weren’t tragic, and I liked seeing very depressing movies because they made me feel less alone. But that was a short period in my life.

**WHAT ARE THE THINGS THAT MAKE YOU LAUGH?**

Oh, Monty Python. Old screwball comedies. I like that show “Little Britain” with David Walliams and Matt Lucas.

**DO YOU HAVE ADVICE FOR THE YOUNG WRITERS YOU MENTOR AT JUILLIARD ABOUT HOW TO MAKE A LIFE IN THE THEATER TODAY?**

Don’t try to write a great play, just try to write a good one. If someone else decides it’s great later, that’s fine, but don’t try to write a great one. Write about something you feel really strongly about, even if it’s a comedy. Don’t write from a mild impulse. And tenacity: just keep going, keep writing.

This interview is courtesy of our friends at the The Old Globe Theatre. To read the rest of Durang’s chat with their Literary Manager/Dramaturg Danielle Mages Amato visit www.pcs.org/Durang-on-VSMS.