

# *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike: Digital Dramaturgy*

By Christopher Durang  
Directed by Eric Rosen

Apr 16–May 25

In bucolic Bucks County, PA, Vanya and his sister Sonia have frittered their lives away living in the same farmhouse where they were raised. Their quiet existence of unease and regret, however, is rocked by the arrival of their glamorous movie star sister (and landlord) Masha, and her hunky boy toy, Spike. As their visit unfolds, a lifetime of sibling rivalry explodes into a weekend of comedic pyrotechnics. Acclaimed playwright Christopher Durang (*The Marriage of Bette and Boo*, *Sister Mary Ignatius...*, Center Stage's *My America*) weaves Chekhovian themes and modern wit into an unforgettable experience critics have hailed as “a sublime state of hilarity” (*New York Magazine*). *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike* is a co-production with *Kansas City Repertory Theatre*.

**Articles provided courtesy of Kansas City Repertory Dramaturgy unless otherwise specified.**

“A writer is not a confectioner, a cosmetic dealer, or an entertainer. He is a man who has signed a contract with his conscience and his sense of duty.”—Anton Chekhov

## I. Biography of Anton Chekhov



### **Chekhov's Life and Times**

This piece originally appeared as part of the production dramaturgy for Center Stage's production of *The Three Sisters* in 2007.

When Anton Chekhov was born in the Black Sea backwater of Taganrog, anywhere from 20 to 40 million Russians lived in slavery as serfs, the legal property of landowners, the imperial family, or the Church. The czar freed the serfs by proclamation in 1861, two years before four million American slaves gained their freedom. Russia, mired in tradition, harnessed to a rigidly stratified society, governed by an imperial autocracy, and entrenched in a centuries-old

agricultural economy, embarked on an all-out effort to industrialize and compete. Webs of railways were thrown across the infinite expanse of the steppes. The population surged to the cities in search of work. There were conflicts of expansion against the Turks, the Japanese, the Chinese; and there continued an established diplomatic and military gavotte with the nations of Europe. There were wild swings from political reform—or the semblance of reform—to reactionary repression. While an elite of about 100,000 enjoyed a steadily rising standard of living and all modern luxuries, many of Russia's 120 million or so citizens lived in nearly medieval conditions. As for the serfs, they emerged from slavery into a poverty made even more abject by the burden of debt.

**“But for every step toward moderation and inclusion, harsh repression would follow.”**

It was an era of contradictions, juxtapositions, and astonishing transformation. Chekhov's lifetime witnessed Russia's emergence from a benighted past towards some measure of modernity. Scientific, cultural, medical, philosophical, literary, musical, technological progress battled with stagnation—a deeply conservative resistance to change of any kind. Railways crisscrossed the interior, but industrial progress was slow to follow. In addition to emancipation, there were other gestures of political reform. But for every step toward moderation and inclusion, harsh repression would follow—and by 1900 Marx was not the only one insisting that a specter haunted the monarchies of Europe. Idealistic calls for a better world, led by the *noblesse oblige* of Tolstoy and his circle, merely decorated the surface of a boiling cauldron of resentment, steeped in poverty and bubbling over with the threat of imminent revolution—which boiled over violently in 1905.

Cultured Russians looked to Germany and France, while the populace at large clung to folk traditions. Like the imperial double-headed eagle, Russia looked both East and West at the same time; a division embodied in another duality of Moscow and St. Petersburg. Moscow: “eastern,” Russian, chaotic, dingy; Petersburg: “western,” European, tidy, orderly. The broad bourgeois boulevards of St. Petersburg, thronged with gladsome gadding gallants, contrasted with the noisome tangle of Moscow's winding alleys, narrow lanes, and onion domes. And the countryside, so placid beneath the brush of the painter Ilya Repin and so ruthlessly chronicled in Chekhov's short stories, offered along with its majestic landscapes a panoply of superstition, corruption, misery, poverty, cruelty, laziness, incompetence, and ignorance.

Amidst these changes and these oppositions, Chekhov's own life offered comparable contrasts and, in a mere 44 years, transformations as remarkable. Regarded by the time of his death as a master of Russian literature and a pioneer of modern drama, his funeral attended by tens of thousands, Chekhov was one of six children born to a barely solvent grocer—himself the son of a former serf—in a town most of the way to nowhere. At 16, Anton was left to fend for himself when his father, bankrupt, took the rest of the family and fled to Moscow. In fact, he had to fend for the whole family; while finishing school, the teenager tutored and sold off family heirlooms to send money to support his parents and siblings.

“He personally interviewed 10,000 prisoners.”

By 19, winning a scholarship to medical school, Chekhov followed the others to Moscow. There, he not only gained his degree as a doctor and started to show the first symptoms of tuberculosis, he began to make money writing short, mostly comic, stories for publication. As an enviable and lucrative writing career took shape, however, Chekhov the scientific humanist asserted himself as well. He made a remarkable voyage of thousands of miles to a prison camp on the Siberian island of Sakhalin, where he personally interviewed 10,000 prisoners. The results, published, became a rallying cry for prison reform and established his credentials as a champion of the downtrodden. As did his volunteering as a doctor during cholera epidemics, famines, and other crises. Yet he also stood resolutely by his friend and publisher Suvorin, among the most viciously reactionary men in the land.

With medicine as his wife and writing as his mistress—as he phrased it—Chekhov pursued a punishing schedule. He wrote incessantly, championed causes, traveled the world, and carried on multiple affairs with besotted women who pursued him in vain. At the same time, he was almost misanthropic in his hunger for solitude; and as his fame and popularity grew, so did his aversion to being celebrated in any way. He was gentle and kind to animals, children, or the sick but was also a coarse practical joker—who loved best to laugh at his own expense. He sought privacy, but bought and built property, the grocer’s son no more. His intimates were nobility, literary, and cultural leaders, the cream of society, yet he also sought out the downtrodden and the needy.

“After the disastrous premiere of *The Seagull*, he even vowed to give up writing theater entirely.”

Comic squibs gave way to more ambivalent and ambitious stories, and the early vaudeville sketches to full-length dramas—unheralded at first, as Chekhov struggled to reconcile, or serve, competing impulses of tone and outlook. After the disastrous premiere of *The Seagull*, he even vowed to give up writing theater entirely.<sup>[a1]</sup> But then came one of those rare moments of world-changing alchemy and a partnership that changed everything. The fledgling Moscow Art Theater sought to spearhead a new approach to theater, to apply new, modern ideas to create a new drama for a new age; to accompany their radical new approach to acting and staging they required new writing to embody their ideals.



Mr. Stanislavsky, met Mr. Chekhov. The theater remounted *The Seagull*, triumphantly, and new horizons beckoned. Chekhov, Stanislavsky, and the Moscow Art Theater came to be associated inseparably, yet they were often at odds over the plays, which Chekhov insisted be played as farces while Stanislavsky, he complained, turned them all into plangent tragedy.

Another partnership that emerged from the association was Chekhov's relationship with the actress Olga Knipper, for whom he wrote the role of Masha in *Three Sisters* and whom he finally married. After decades of dalliances and hesitations and reluctance and furtive affairs, Chekhov succumbed to wedded bliss. Only, of course, to introduce more contradiction by spending more time away from his wife than with her. No easy domesticity for this pair, as she remained in Moscow rehearsing and performing while he sought healthy climates and a cure.

For haunting each of Chekhov's achievements, perhaps driving his unflagging efforts, was the terrible, undeniable medical reality of his consumption. Long before an official diagnosis, long before he brought himself to admit it or accepted care, Chekhov had suffered from an advancing case of tuberculosis that was increasingly accompanied by a host of other debilitating ailments, inside and out. Of course, he was sufficiently a man of science to know his death sentence for precisely what it was; lest he have any doubts, he had watched his brother die of the same wasting scourge. [a1] But on he forged, only gradually giving way to the bloody coughs and the urgent need to rest in a warm, dry climate. So having conquered Moscow artistically, and immortalized his adopted city in *Three Sisters*, he retired first to the house he built in Yalta, then retreated to a German spa. It was there, with a final sip of champagne, that he died in 1904. [a2] Ever the centerpiece of odd juxtapositions, ever alive to the absurd, ever the cynical optimist, ever the most private of public figures, how Chekhov would have loved his final accidental gestures. Shipped back to Moscow for burial in a refrigerated train car marked "Oysters," his coffin was confused with that of a dead general and the throngs who came to mourn him followed the wrong cortège.

**“He always insisted on the comic, farcical elements of his plays—especially unexpected and accidental gestures everyone else overlooked.”**

In his maturity, Chekhov was hailed as a standard-bearer of literary Naturalism, the objective,

quasi-scientific observation, dissection, and recording of human behavior. And in some ways, so he was. Of course, he always insisted on the comic, farcical elements of his plays—even, or especially, in the unexpected and out-of-the-way little accidental gestures everyone else overlooked. [a1] His theatrical writing successively rejected the careful plotting of the well-made play so in fashion in his day; rejected the sentimental moralizing or simplistic associations of cause and consequence of 19<sup>th</sup>-century drama; rejected the pure poetic aesthetics of Romanticism and Symbolism; and rejected even the basic linear structures of classical theater. He wrote quite proudly of these rejections, in fact. True to his many contradictions—as writer-doctor, comedian-clinician, reformer-misanthrope, philanderer-misogynist, faithful skeptic—his writing balanced contrasting impulses, and elements of Naturalism could co-exist with aspects of Symbolism. [a2] One colleague noted in his writing a resemblance to the Pointillist painting of Georges Seurat.

Whatever the category, there's no trouble discerning in his writing the seeds of what would become so much modern drama, from Ionesco to Becket, Maeterlinck to Mamet, O'Neill to Shepard. Subtext, absurdity, existentialism, symbolism, realism are all there. Nothing happens, or seems to happen. Nothing happens, and everything happens. Just life, unexpected and incomplete.

“The only reviewer who ever made an impression on me was Skabichevsky, who prophesied that I would die drunk in the bottom of a ditch.”—Anton Chekhov

“Any idiot can face a crisis—it's day to day living that wears you out.”—Anton Chekhov

## II. Christopher Durang's *Cherry Orchard*

By Emma Brown, *Interview Magazine*



*Vanya, Sonia, Masha, and Spike* is not a Chekhov parody. Rather Christopher Durang's newest play at Lincoln Center takes the utterly demoralizing anguish of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* and *Three Sisters*, and transforms it into something oddly heartening and, of course, very amusing.

Starring three Durang regulars—his Yale graduate school classmates Sigourney Weaver and Kristine Nielsen, and old friend David Hyde Pierce—and three young actors—Billy Magnussen, Shalita Grant, and Genevieve Angelson—his new play centers around three a-little-older-than-middle-aged siblings dissatisfied with their lives and each other. Now 63, Durang wrote his first

play over 55 years ago. It was, he tells us, two pages long and based on an episode of *I Love Lucy*. "I didn't have a sense of how long, or short, a play should be," he laughs.

*Interview* recently spoke with the playwright, professor, and occasional actor about Chekhovian despair, his favorite teacher, and moving away from early Durang darkness.

EMMA BROWN: You mentioned that *Vanya* was the first time in 15 years that you had written a play with certain actors in mind. Kristine Neilson was also in your last few plays; were you not thinking of her when you wrote them?

You know, I take it back. I guess in the last one, I did kind of think of Kristine. One reason I try not to think of specific actors is that you don't always know who the director is going to be, and the director might have his or her own casting ideas, and it's not good to force a director to go in a direction they don't like. When I was younger I wrote with actors from Yale in mind, including Sigourney, and I ran into directors who would say, "Well, they're not how I see the part." And I would be in the bad position of having told them I wrote something with them in mind and then working with a director who doesn't want to use them. Also, people like Sigourney, whose movie career keeps moving ahead, which I'm happy about, she's often not available. I've had times where I've tried to get her and I couldn't. So for those reasons, I'm a little careful.

In recent years I've tended to finish an Act One, and as a way to trigger myself to stop procrastinating and do an Act Two, I will request a theater give me a date for a reading, say, in two months. With a reading, of course, you're also thinking of what actors you're going to ask to the reading. In the last play, *Why Torture is Wrong, and the People Who Love Them*, I did think of Kristine when I was writing Act Two. She was in the reading. I didn't have a director when we did the reading—but then when I asked Nicholas Martin to do it, he's a big fan of Kristine's. So, easy.

B: It must be difficult being friends with actors, and then not always being able to have them in your plays.

It was probably more of an issue early in my career, because I was a little naïve and hadn't thought about, "Oh, gee, that actor will be disappointed if I say I've written something and then the director doesn't see it the same way." I guess there was a period when it was more tricky. But mostly I enjoy being friends with a lot of actors.

B: I was wondering how you came up with Billy Magnussen and Shalita Grant's characters, Spike and Cassandra? Cassandra is obviously not from Chekhov.

I'll do Cassandra first. I've always loved the concept of the character in Greek tragedy and I sort of had it in my head that I wanted to do something with Cassandra but I didn't know what. I just liked the idea of this cleaning woman, who just came in and, not only kept seeing things in the future, but spoke in these sort of Greek tragedy monologues, using words one wouldn't usually use. I don't use an outline and I don't always know where the story is going to go, so that's where Cassandra came in—just seeing things that worried her. [In the script] she says, "Beware of Hootie Pie." I didn't know what that meant; when I wrote it—it was just a crazy non-sequitur—it



sort of unfolded for me the same way it did for the audience. I started out with the crazy name of Hootie Pie, and although she's offstage, she's quite significant to the plot.

“Normally I try to not think of Sigourney when I'm writing something because normally she's not available, but I broke that this time.”

About Spike—it's funny, Sigourney has been married to the same person for a long, long time—certainly over 20 years—so she's extremely stable, in terms of her life. Normally I try to not think of Sigourney when I'm writing something because normally she's not available, but I broke that this time. Since I was putting the play in the present day I wanted to make the actress—who is actually a bit like Madame Arkadina—have a very young boy toy. I also thought that would discombobulate Vanya, a person who is sort of gay, but quiet about it. You're not really quite sure what his experience has, or hasn't been. I don't feel like I know anybody like Spike [but] David Pierce, who's playing Vanya, said something interesting to me about it—David, in 1982, was in the Broadway production of my play *Beyond Therapy*, and he played the waiter, Andrew. It was his first professional acting job; he got his equity card, which I've always been proud of. [David] said to me that he thought that Andrew, the waiter, was a sort of precursor for Spike. And it is true: [Andrew] only shows up in the very last scene. There's been a running gag that [the lead characters] Prudence and Bruce, who met through a personal ad, keep coming to this restaurant where there's never a waiter. It's a very funny entrance, a built-in laugh. But as the thing goes on, the waiter's character is kind of seductive—he says some inappropriate things and ends up coming out in his motorcycle setup to go off with Bob. I never made the connection with Spike, but I see what David means, there's a certain naughty quality to the waiter that Spike has as well.

B: Is *Beyond Therapy* still your most performed play, in terms of amateur theater?

You know, it is. It really is. That thing has had legs.

B: It seems especially relevant now, with online dating, etc.

Oh, that's true. I must say, a personal ad in a newspaper seems downright old-fashioned, by now. When I wrote the play, I didn't know anyone who had ever answered a personal ad. But I did, certainly, see them. I remember seeing personals in *The Village Voice* and *New York Magazine*. And I just thought it was a fun way of getting people to meet when they hadn't met before, or only exchanged letters, or something. But, yes, that's true.

B: Do you normally write on commission, or do you approach a theater once you've completed a play?

I don't always work on commission. Usually, and particularly, when I was younger, I just would write a play, and then discuss with my agent who we might submit to. I guess I've had a couple of commissions over my life, one of them, actually, was *Beyond Therapy* was commissioned.

B: When was the last time that you acted in a play?

Gee, it's been a long time. I had an odd acting job in TV, in 2000.... Oh wait! The Huntington Theater in Boston did a revival of my play, *Laughing Wild*, and it was directed by Nicholas Martin, who also directed *Vanya and Sonia*. I acted in it opposite Debra Monk. That was fun. That was 2005.

B: Do you ever miss acting?

I do. I keep thinking it would be fun to find something that I could do again, but my living in Pennsylvania makes it a little hard for me to really do things. It would have to be something I would really want to commit to, but I'm kind of interested in it. I feel like I'm now older, so I can play people's grandfather now. Or older uncle.

B: You could go back and play some of the older parts in your own plays!

Oh, that's a thought, yeah.

B: Do you go to the theater often?

Much less than I would like. I did live in New York City from 1975 to 1995, and at that time sometimes I would just, spur of the moment, hop on the subway and go to a theater. Back then I often had to get standing room tickets—do they still do standing room tickets? I wonder. I hope they do—I can't do that now, the commute is complicated, so I don't see plays as much as I'd like. Also, because I teach at Julliard, I see a lot of student plays.

B: What is something you say to your students, on the first day? Do you have words of wisdom that you like to impart every year?

I'm definitely not as organized as that. Marsha [Norman] and I co-teach in the room at the same time, always. A student brings in a play they've been working on, either a full or partial draft, and we read it aloud, picking parts among ourselves, and we discuss it. Marsha and I oversee and start the discussion; as we were doing it I started to realize it was a little bit like running a talk show. Because we're both still writing for the theater and we both have a lot of experience working with directors and theaters, we end up giving a lot of practical advice: What do you do if you disagree with a director? How do you choose a director? How do you deal with the rewrite suggestions, when you're not feeling in agreement? That kind of thing.

B: What *do* you do if you don't agree with the director?

It's tricky. Significantly, no one can change the playwright's words without his or her permission. And I think that, when you're younger, you might run up against people trying to do that more. At that point, you have to be really tough about it.

B: You've talked a lot about how you had a professor in college, the playwright William Alfred, whom you really admired. I know a lot of other Harvard graduates in theater and film—Tommy Lee Jones, Stockard Channing—have also cited him as their favorite professor. Did you know

what you were getting into when you signed up for his class?

I was in his playwriting class my senior year at Harvard. I had had two lecture classes with him, so I didn't know him on a one-to-one basis, but he was just a wonderful lecturer—his personality was just very engaging, and idiosyncratic too—and I knew of the fact that he had had a couple of plays that he wrote that were pretty respected.

“The Catholic chaplain, who I didn't know, wrote a letter against the play—he was offended by it—and he got different people to sign the letter with him.”

When I went to Harvard I knew that you couldn't major in theater, and I decided that that was okay with me, I should just be well rounded, but I didn't end up being the best student. They never offered a playwriting class of any kind, but my final semester of my final year, all of a sudden, William Alfred was offering a seminar. I think there were 15 slots. I had done a very jokey musical my first semester of my final year, called *The Greatest Musical Ever Sung*, and it was the Gospels, told musical-comedy style. It was not, in my opinion, harsh, like *Sister Mary Ignatius* (1979) can seem sometimes, it was much more lighthearted. But, the Catholic chaplain, who I didn't know, wrote a letter against the play—he was offended by it—and he got different people to sign the letter with him, including William Alfred. So there's my favorite professor, signing a letter, saying he was offended by this play. But I also knew of his personality, and he was very sweet, and he went to mass every day, which is unusual, and I had in my head that, I bet he never actually saw the play, but if the Catholic chaplain went to him, he went along with him.

When I was submitting a play [to get into his class], *The Nature and Purpose of the Universe*, I didn't know what he would think because it was very absurdist and rather dark. In it, there's a crazy nun who kidnaps the Pope, and she doesn't *mean* to kill the Pope, but she ends up killing the Pope. And I thought, "Oh my God, he signed this letter against me, and he's now going to think that I'm this crazy ex-Catholic!" So I really had no idea if he was going to accept me, and I was so excited when he did. It was the best playwriting class I ever took. He was really warm; he really liked my play, which made me feel good, and he took each of us, separately, to lunch over the semester. I had my lunch with him and when we were just talking back and forth, I said to him, "Do you realize that I'm the person that wrote that musical that you signed a letter complaining about?" (I didn't use the word "complaining.") And he smiled, and said, "Yes. You're very mischievous."

B: Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* is so brutal and upsetting. Your play begins with a similar premise—this overwhelming and inescapable anguish—but it doesn't continue this way, it ends on a positive note. Was that intentional? Or did it just happen as you wrote the play.

It just happened. And I know what you mean about *Uncle Vanya*. I find the last scene, when they're just going over the books, and they're so in despair and so unhappy with their lives, it's extremely sad. And when I was in my 20s I was depressed a lot of the time, some of it kind of serious—it was interfering with my life and I wasn't doing well in school, because I was just too

depressed to do anything—and I think I read *Uncle Vanya* at that point.

B: That's a terrible time to read *Uncle Vanya*.

Yeah, and Vanya, in the old-fashioned translation that I read says, "We'll suffer through a long succession of tedious days, and tedious nights," which I actually give to Sonia in Act One of my play. But that's how I sort of felt about things, in my sophomore year of college.

“As I was writing it, Vanya surprised me, he became somebody trying to be diplomatic and negotiate between [his] two [sisters], which is what I did with my parents when I was young.”

I think when I started writing the play, I thought that Vanya and Sonia were going to be equally bitter. As I was writing it, Vanya surprised me, he became somebody trying to be diplomatic and negotiate between [his] two [sisters], which is what I did with my parents when I was young, and my father was an alcoholic, and my mother and him would be fighting. In a certain sense, he seems a little more at peace than Sonia, and that just happened in the writing. It was not a conscious decision that I made. I very much liked the fact that Masha quotes, "Oh, Olga, let's go to Moscow." And Sonia gets to say, "I don't want to go to Moscow," which is so much *not* what the Chekhov characters are feeling in . I almost feel self-conscious about it, but, my early plays—in my 20s—often have very dark endings. Sister Mary Ignatius basically killed two people, one in self-defense and one not, and then it just ends with her keeping a gun on another person while the little boy's on her lap, reciting questions. That's a dark ending. But starting with *Miss Witherspoon* (2005), and arguably with *Betty's Summer Vacation* (1999), which is a rather dark play, I seem to have more hopeful things at the end. I seem not to want to send the audience home unhappy.

“Doctors are just the same as lawyers; the only difference is that lawyers merely rob you, whereas doctors rob you and kill you too.”—Anton Chekhov

### III. My America monologue by Christopher Durang

Christopher Durang was one of many playwrights and artists to participate in the Center Stage artistic initiative *My America*. See his monologue here:

### IV. Three Sisters Photo Gallery

(Click images to enlarge.)













## V. Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike Quiz

[Which character from VANYA AND SONIA AND MASHA AND SPIKE are you?](#)

## VI. Additional Links

For more information on the world of the play, check out some of our links below:

- Study Guide from the McCarter Theatre Education Department

<http://www.mccarter.org/Education/vanya/vanya.html>

- Listen to this Christopher Durang Interview from Dramatists Guild

<http://www.dramatistsguild.com/eventseducation/durang2013.aspx>