

SVCT brings human comedy of dysfunctional family to the stage

Actors perform show at MH Playhouse that won 2013 Tony Best Play award

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By Marty Cheek | Photos by Marty Cheek

The South Valley Civic Theatre's production of the absurdly hilarious "Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike" opened at the Morgan Hill Playhouse April 21 to roars of laughter as the audience watched a comedy about sisterly rivalries, sexual jealousies and life regrets.

Written by Christopher Durang, the play won the 2013 Tony Award for Best Play. It opens with middle-aged siblings Vanya (played by Scott Lynch) and Sonia (Adrienne Wilkinson), who share the family home in Bucks County, Penn., bickering about the circumstances of their lives. Soon their Hollywood movie-star sister, Masha (Denee Lewis), swoops into the story with her new boy-toy boyfriend, Spike (Tyler Savin). Resentments of past hurts flare up, leading to Masha's threats to sell the house. Adding absurdist humor into the mix is the sassy maid Cassandra (Roberta Vinkhuyzen), who can comically predict the future, and a starstruck aspiring actress named Nina (Krista Warner), whose youthful prettiness somewhat threatens the autocratic Masha.



From left, Adrienne Wilkinson, playing Sonia, Tyler Savin as Spike and Denee Lewis as Masha rehearse for the South Valley Civic Theatre's newest play.



From left, Scott Lynch, as Vanya, and Adrienne Wilkinson, playing Sonia, develop a scene at a dress rehearsal for the play produced by the South Valley Civic Theatre group.

The play is directed by Myra F. Kaelin, whose previous work with SVCT are "The Producers" and "City of Angels."

She first saw "Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike" on Broadway years ago when it starred David Hyde Pierce and Kristine Nielsen. She fell in love with the offbeat characters and their highly-charged emotional relationships.

The play is a humorous adaptation of the themes of Anton Chekhov, but audiences don't require familiarity with the Russian playwright to appreciate the human comedy of a dysfunctional family facing a crisis moment in their lives, she said.

I just think it was so poignant. I loved what they say in the show, and when you see the end, you'll see that it really comes full circle," Kaelin said. "It's just a wonderful take on where our society has kind of gone right now and how we've kind of forgotten these people who might have a little bit of experience as they age and we lose some of that. As funny as it is, it's actually quite poignant."

The performers brings honest moments of humanity to the various roles, which heightens the humor, she said.

"It's been a pleasure to work with all the actors. I feel so privileged because they are all so talented," she said. "One of the things I drove home with all the actors is that comedy is only funny if there's honesty behind it. If you're not being honest to what your character is, it's not going to be funny. It's going to look like you're trying to be funny, and that's not where comedy comes from."



Tyler Savin plays Spike as a weird and wild sex-maniac boyfriend thrown into a volatile cocktail of emotions in the family chemistry. Within a few minutes of meeting the family, he strips to his undies to take a swim across the backyard lake, showing off a muscular physique to entice the gay Vanya.

"You really have to have some real confidence to play that role, and Tyler truly brings it — absolutely brings it," Kaelin said.

Lynch portrays Vanya with quiet wisdom accented with a dry sense of humor.

"I'm the older brother, the kind of a deadpan person who is the foundation of the family," he said. "I'm suppose to keep my sisters from feuding. One, Sonia, is very depressed and then there's Masha who is the

Hollywood star and she's just all over. You're dealing with siblings, you're dealing with aging, taking care of parents, my character is gay. There's just a lot of things that are topical that people can relate to."

The comedy comes quick as the characters react to revelations that rise from the tensions of their family relationships, he said.

"If you see the show, it's one of those shows where things are constantly moving, and the characters are constantly moving back and forth and so they're developing enough of a relationship to have that dialogue work," Lynch said.

The comedy is really coming from the relationships with the siblings. And then you have the Spike character, who is this kind of dumb kid but he's constantly taking her clothes off. Masha is in love with him, and the other two siblings are say, 'What the heck is going on? What does she see in him?' And a lot of the comedy comes from that."



Wilkinson plays Sonia as a 52-year-old never-married woman taken to the edge of craziness because of her unhappiness with her life, having spent her prime years aiding her parents who suffered from Alzheimer's disease and are now deceased.



"My role is the younger sister who spent her life taking care of her parents," she said. "And she's definitely got a jealousy of her older sister who is a movie star. She's also an adopted child, so that's another complicating element. During the whole show, Sonia goes through a roller coaster of emotions."

Producer Mary Dokter considers "Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike" the riskiest play that SVCT has so far produced because of the absurdities of the comedy, the adult themes as well as some of the language used by the characters under tense emotions. She recommends the play for an audience of 16 years or old.

"It's a good story," she said. "It's got comedy, but it also has a message about life regrets. For me the characters look back on their lives and how they lived their lives. Some people were successful but there is always a down-side to success. You sacrifice something. In the end, there is a redeeming factor."