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'VANYA AND SONIA AND MASHA AND SPIKE' AT PUBLIC THEATRE

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Seated: Jonathan Hadley as "Vanya" – standing left to right: Janet Mitchko as "Sonia", Robyne Parrish as "Masha" and Jarid Faubel as "Spike." Courtesy photo

Playwright Christopher Durang scored big with his "Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike." The 2013 Tony Award-winning play is perhaps the most broadly entertaining the 66 year-old New Jersey native has yet written.

Durang's work often looks at tough issues through a lens that makes us laugh at the absurdity of it all, even as we cringe a bit at what he's revealing. For this play, he's drawn heavily on the work of Anton Chekhov as well as some classical Greek dramatists to tell the story of three present-day siblings trying to come to grips with the passage of time and the frittering away of their dreams of happiness as they gather at their late parent's upscale rural home.

Some have suggested there's a bit of "snob appeal" with this play, in that fans of Chekhov can have a lot of fun recognizing quotes, characters and themes from the great 19th-century Russian playwright's work. Durang seems to have inoculated against that, though, by telegraphing many of the references and further making their presence a big part of the joke. Knowing nods and I-get-it chuckles aside, audiences needn't dig out their old school notes to enjoy this play. Anyone who likes a good laugh, leavened with a little something to think about, will likely enjoy it.

Middle-aged Vanya and his adopted sister Sonia both feel as if life has passed them by in favor of their sister Masha, a successful though aging actress who has come for a visit with a boy-toy in tow. The siblings bicker and reconcile, only to bicker again, until Masha drops a bomb: she has decided to sell the house.

Jonathan Hadley's Vanya is the more level headed, if slightly sardonic, member of the family while Janet Mitchko's Sonia is a "bi-polar" handful. Both performers were first rate at Sunday's matinee, Hadley in both subtle and suggestive moments and later in delivering an epic rant about how the 1950s weren't so bad when compared to today. Mitchko showed excellent comic timing and an ability to inject just enough genuine feeling into her role to warm her final landing place. Her Maggie Smith impersonation was a highlight as were all her contributions.

Robyne Parrish enlivens Masha's unhinged moments while holding, almost until the end, to her diva's self-absorption. She made her character recognizable, in an odd but effective sort of way.

Jarid Faubel, as Masha's paramour Spike, is as shallow as his muscles are well-defined. His "reverse strip" is a hoot but his dramatic monologue proved among the few slow spots in the show (more a problem in the writing than the acting).

Jamie Rezanour has a ball with the role of the psychic cleaning lady Cassandra and Anna Doyle rounds out the cast as the aspiring young actress Nina.

Working with an interior set open to nature in the back (designed by Judy Staicer), Director Christopher Schario has mostly kept things brisk, though a couple of brief but very quiet pauses and some tripped-up dialogue had Sunday's performance feeling not completely in sync.

Nevertheless, this is a fun show on many levels and, to paraphrase Sonia at the close, you won't long to go to Moscow after seeing it.

“VANYA AND SONIA AND MASHA AND SPIKE”

Where: The Public Theatre, 31 Maple St, Lewiston

Reviewed: Jan. 25; continues through February 1

Tickets: \$5 to \$20

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