



CHRISTOPHER DURANG'S

VANYA AND SONIA AND MASHA AND SPIKE



A Study Guide by Martin Andrucki

The Public Theatre and Professor Martin Andrucki own all rights to this Study Guide.

Educational Underwriters



Helen & George Ladd Charitable Corporation

BJ Investments

EDUCATION & OUTREACH SUPPORTERS

Agren Appliance
Auburn Manufacturing, Inc.
Benoit's Bakery & Wine Cellar
Berube's Complete Auto Care
Budget Document Technology
Carrabassett Coffee Company
Geiger
Lewiston/Auburn Children's Foundation

Margaret E. Burnham Charitable Trust
Maine Community Foundation—High Valley Fund
Penmor Lithographers
People's United Bank
The Simmons Foundation
St. Mary's Regional Medical Center
Tambrands, Inc.

EDUCATIONAL FRIENDS

Andrucki & Associates
Auburn-Lewiston YMCA
Evergreen Printing
F.X. Marcotte Furniture
Patti Gagne Allstate Insurance
Hammond Lumber Co.

Head to Toe Physical Therapy
Marden's Discount
Sam's Italian Foods
The Italian Bakery
United Ambulance Service

Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike

By Christopher Durang

PRESENTED AT THE PUBLIC THEATRE
JANUARY, 2015

A STUDY GUIDE

By Martin Andrucki

Charles A. Dana Professor of Theater
BATES COLLEGE

THE PLAYWRIGHT. Christopher Durang was born in New Jersey in 1949. He attended Catholic grammar and high schools, and entered Harvard College in 1967. Following college, he studied playwriting at the Yale School of Drama, graduating in 1974.

He began his career as a dramatist early in life. As he wrote on his official website in 2007,

I decided at age 8 to write a play, and my Catholic grammar school cancelled class one afternoon, and put it on! (Pretty flexible and adventurous of them, no?) Then at a later school – a Benedictine junior high/high school called Delbarton in Morristown, N.J. – the school put on two musicals Kevin Farrell and I wrote: “Banned in Boston” and “Businessman’s Holiday.” (Kevin was my best friend, and we wrote the first show when we were 13, the second when we were 15-16. I did book and lyrics, and Kevin did the music.)

Following graduate school he had several plays staged off- and off-off Broadway, and began developing a reputation as a rising comic talent.

The playwright’s website provides the following summary of his professional career:

Christopher Durang is a playwright whose plays include *A History of the American Film* (Tony nomination, Best Book of a Musical, 1978), *The Actor’s Nightmare*, *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You* (Obie award; off-Bway run 1981-83), *Beyond Therapy* (on Broadway in 1982, with Dianne Wiest and John Lithgow), *Baby with the Bathwater* (Playwrights Horizons, 1983), *The Marriage of Bette and Boo* (Public Theatre, 1985; Obie award, Dramatists Guild Hull Warriner

Award), *Laughing Wild* (Playwrights Horizons, 1987), *Durang/Durang* (an evening of six plays at Manhattan Theatre Club, 1994, including the Tennessee Williams' parody, *For Whom the Southern Belle Tolls*), *Sex and Longing* (Lincoln Center Theatre production at the Cort Theatre, 1996, starring Sigourney Weaver), and *Betty's Summer Vacation* (Playwrights Horizons, 1999; Obie award).

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. . . .

More recent works include *Why Torture is Wrong and the People Who Love Them* (2009), and *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike*, which won the Tony Award for best play in 2013.

Since 1994 he has taught playwriting at The Julliard School in New York, a prestigious school of the arts.

Behind that list of artistic and professional accomplishments lies a troubled family history that has played an important role in shaping the playwright's work. As his website tells us, he is the only child of an alcoholic father and a mother enraged by her husband's addiction. Consequently he spent much of his childhood either watching his parents engage in vitriolic arguments, or fearfully anticipating the eruption of the next shouting match.

In addition, his parents suffered from a physical incompatibility that made it impossible for his mother to bear additional children. Despite this she continued to conceive, suffering three stillbirths during the years of Durang's childhood. These traumatic events drove his mother into depression and his father deeper into alcoholism. According to the playwright, his mother told him when he was fourteen that, "there was a year of my life back then that she didn't know I was alive, after the death of the first baby."

His parents separated when he was in his early teens, and later divorced. "The issues that got fought about never got resolved," Durang writes, "they just got stirred up and served again, like some poisonous cocktail." This pattern of constantly-repeated conflict and pain seemed to prove that people were helpless prisoners of their psychological compulsions, incapable of change. Life, Durang would conclude, was just a hopeless cycle of recurrent misery.

It was as a consequence of this painful family background—and the dark view of the world it bred—that he fell into a deep depression during his college years. Therapy eventually helped him overcome his nearly paralyzing illness, but the dismal view of life remained and found expression in his early writing.

This would not seem like a promising history for a comic playwright, yet Durang's plays are often uproariously funny even though his view of human nature has been mostly pessimistic and his anger at human institutions deep.

His most recent plays, however, show a marked shift in tone. *Miss Witherspoon* (2005, produced at The Public Theatre in 2007) gives us a central character who begins her dramatic journey with the kind of dim view of the world that colors Durang's earlier plays. But she gradually discards her soot-colored lenses and begins to entertain the possibility of hope and redemption.

And in *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike* (2012), the major characters work their ways through an unhappy tangle of disappointments and betrayals to arrive, by the end of the play, at a state of emotional serenity. As the Beatles sing *Here Comes the Sun*, Vanya and Sonia proclaim that, "we can hope. . . . Always hope."

In an interview with *The New York Times*, Durang acknowledges that for him it is now "possible to see God as a force, to connect to him or her spiritually." As a result, he speculates, it may be that "one can effect a certain outcome by one's choice." In other words, human beings are not necessarily prisoners of their destructive personal histories, and so can venture an optimistic expectation or two. On the other hand, this tentative belief remains for Durang "a fable, half-fantasy. I'm intrigued by three-quarters of it. But I don't entirely believe it."

THE SETTING. *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike* (henceforth, *VSMS*) takes place "in a lovely farm house in Bucks County," an area of Pennsylvania just north of Philadelphia. Long known as home to many successful writers and theater people, Bucks County counts among its residents, past and present, James Michener, Dorothy Parker, S.J. Perelman, Oscar Hammerstein, and Stephen Sondheim. It is also where Christopher Durang now lives.

Peaceful and semi-rural, Bucks County lies between the urban centers of New York and Philadelphia—readily accessible to both places, but just far enough from each to feel comfortably remote. With an average household income of \$76,000—which is 64% higher than Maine's average—this is an area of quiet affluence, many of whose residents are well-known figures in the cultural and artistic worlds of the two big cities that flank it. Like Martha's Vineyard or Provincetown, Bucks County has figured prominently as a refuge for artists who want to stay in touch with the metropolis while escaping from its pressures and distractions.

THE PLOT. To begin with, the title of the play needs explaining. Vanya, Sonia, and Masha are the names of major characters in the plays of Anton Chekhov (1860-1904), the great Russian dramatist. Vanya and Sonia appear in *Uncle Vanya* (1897), while characters named Masha turn up in *The Sea Gull* (1896) and *The Three Sisters* (1901). Durang tosses in the totally non-Chekovian "Spike" for comic contrast. And yet another of Durang's characters, Nina, shares her name with a similarly beautiful and stage-struck girl, also from *The Sea Gull*.

Vanya in *VSMS* reveals that he and his sisters were given names from Chekhov plays by their "two professor parents . . . so active in community theater." However, the arrival of Nina in Bucks County, on a visit to her aunt and uncle, is just a happy coincidence.

Not only does the title of the play allude to Chekhov, but its emotional atmosphere, much of its dialog, and important elements of its plot all bear the Chekovian stamp.

For example, in *VSMS*, Vanya and Sonia—brother and sister—live together in a farmhouse. The playwright tells us that Vanya is, "Resigned to his life," while she is, "Discontent, upset, regretful." In Chekhov's play, Vanya and Sonia, uncle and niece, live together on a remote Russian estate. A man in

his late middle age, Vanya feels as if his life has been empty and wasted; Sonia, a young woman, stands on the threshold of a life that will be equally unfulfilled.

Early in *VSMS* Sonia declares that she is “in mourning for my life”—a direct quotation from *The Sea Gull*. Later on, Vanya stages a reading of an offbeat play he has been writing, partly to impress his sister, Masha, a successful actress on a visit from Hollywood with her latest lover in tow. In *The Sea Gull*, Treplev stages an oddball play *he* has written—partly to impress his mother, a successful actress on a visit from Moscow with *her* latest lover in tow.

VSMS also reaches back beyond Chekhov to *The Oresteia* (458 B.C.) of Aeschylus, the oldest extant Greek tragedy. One of its characters, Cassandra, shares a name with Vanya and Sonia’s housekeeper. The mythical Cassandra was given the gift of prophecy by Apollo, but was simultaneously cursed with being always disbelieved. Durang’s Cassandra is also a prophet, and a voodoo witch, whose prophecies all turn out to be true in the end. Adding the formality of Athenian tragedy to the play’s semi-Russian atmosphere, she periodically breaks out in pronouncements that comically echo the tragic utterances of her Greek original:

Beware the Hootie Owls of Bucks County.
Avoid all real estate transactions for the next 20 years.
You will sell at a loss!
Wait til the market improves, you foolish citizen of Athens!

Chekhovian quotations, allusions, emotions, and plot devices join with evocations of Athenian tragedy to remind us that there are archetypal characters and situations that occur throughout literature—and life. Originally treated tragically, in *VSMS* they are presented with comic irony.

The two acts of this dramatic pastiche flank an offstage event that the audience only hears about: a costume party at the house once belonging to the American author, Dorothy Parker. (She did live in Bucks County, and her former house still stands.) It seems appropriate for a costume party to lie at the center of this play, given that its characters are virtually “in costume” from beginning to end, playing roles based on figures from Chekhov and Aeschylus. The party, paradoxically, gives them the opportunity to step out of their scripted lives and to experiment with different identities, a crucial experience for at least one of them.

Act I takes place during the day and early evening leading up to the party; Act II shows us the party’s aftermath. Act I shows us preparation and anticipation; Act II works its way through the consequences.

As the play begins, Vanya, a man in his late 50s, sips his morning coffee. His sister, Sonia, a woman of about 50, enters with a cup of coffee she has poured for him. Out of consideration for her fragile feelings, Vanya agrees to drink her cup rather than his. Unfortunately, Sonia’s coffee doesn’t taste as good, which he tells her. This leads to an emotional crisis that ends with her smashing the cup of coffee against the wall. Sonia, it turns out, has only two pleasant moments in the days of her uneventful life, and one of them is bringing her brother his coffee. Now he has deprived her of that smidgen of satisfaction, and the day is off to a dismal start. Smashing the cup, she says, was an “angry ‘I hate my life and I hate you’ response.”

As these two unhappy people review the conditions of their lives, we learn that Sonia “pines for” Vanya, but he doesn’t pine back, partly because she’s his sister (but by adoption, not blood—so pining might be ok), but also because, as he says, “I . . . march to a different drummer.” Which we understand to mean he’s gay.

And they both resent their sister, Masha, the movie actress, who has been “off gallivanting, having a life,” while they have been moldering away in Bucks County, first tending their aged mother and father, and then, following their parents’ deaths, sitting in their farmhouse, watching life pass them by. They look out their window at the nearby pond and notice that the blue heron, a cherished daily visitor, has not yet arrived: is this a bad omen? References to the missing heron will pop up throughout the plot.

Cassandra then erupts onto stage, replacing Vanya and Sonia’s bitter melancholy with her prophetic vehemence: “I see visions. Shadows of what lies ahead. It is my curse to see these shadows and my duty to warn you.” “Beware of Hootie Pie,” she warns, “and also beware of something happening to this house. . . . Someone will sell the house right from under you and you will become homeless.”

Both warnings turn out to be well-founded, as we learn later in the play. But for the moment, they just seem like the ranting of an eccentric housekeeper.

With Cassandra’s prophecy in mind, Sonia reflects on how important their house has been to her as a place of comfort and safety, the only home she has known since being taken from an orphanage by her adoptive parents. She identifies with the wild turkeys that roam the property, falling out of the trees they try to sleep in. “I am a wild turkey,” she declares, comically echoing Chekhov’s Nina who calls herself “a sea gull.” She reminds us of Chekhov again when she declares her love for their cherry orchard—a feature whose existence Vanya denies.

“I want to feel hope,” Sonia says, but as a result of Cassandra’s prophecies she is “filled with dread.” “Hope is the result of being delusional,” Vanya responds, further darkening the morning’s mood. To cheer themselves up, they think about cookies, which leads Vanya to remember that Masha would never eat more than one graham cracker, keeping tabs on her figure even as a child. This reminds Sonia that she has forgotten to tell her brother that Masha is in fact about to pay them a visit, a fact no sooner announced than Masha arrives accompanied by her latest lover, Spike. She is “*attractive and grand, mid 50s, looking great. . . . dressed well. . . . as if she might run into photographers somewhere.*” He is “*age 29 or less. . . . dressed in worn out jeans. . . . Sure of himself, and self-involved.*”

The three siblings immediately begin getting on each other’s nerves. Sonia describes her dreary life, which stands in such stark contrast with Masha’s glamorous career as a movie star: “We sit still a lot. We look out the window. We bicker. We long for what the world cannot give. We are in our twilight years, and we realize we have never really lived.”

Masha then announces that she is attending a costume party at the Dorothy Parker house, and has talked the hostess into inviting Vanya and Sonya. She will dress as Walt Disney’s version of Snow White, and they will come as members of her entourage, costumed as two of the seven dwarves: Dopey and Doc.

Meanwhile Vanya and Sonia get acquainted with Masha's newest lover, whose real name is Vlad. Presumably mindful of his ancient namesake, Vlad the Impaler, he has chosen "Spike" as his acting alias. At this point in his career the most notable achievement he can claim is "almost" having been cast in a new television series. Otherwise, his major accomplishments are his good looks and his unshakeable self-regard. Seeing her sister "hooked up with some young stud" adds yet another weight to Sonia's burden of sadness. "You make me feel bad," she tells Masha, "I am forced to live through a succession of tedious days and tedious nights, and I never have fallen in love with anyone. Nor anyone with me. I'm sorry I was adopted into this family. I wish I had been left in the orphanage, and killed myself." With that she exits.

Spike decides he'd like to take a swim in the family pond, strips down to his underwear, and heads out the door. Sonia returns after her fit of dejection and immediately begins comparing her empty life with Masha's adventure-filled career. At which point Masha, eager to claim some dignified unhappiness for herself, declares that she deeply regrets not having become a classical actress, and having turned down the role of Masha in a production of *Three Sisters*. Instead, she took a part in "that movie about the nymphomaniac serial killer"—and its four sequels—the role which gained her fame and wealth.

Cassandra returns, still warning about Hootie Pie, who, it turns out, is Masha's new personal assistant. As it turns out it was her idea for Masha to dress as Disney's Snow White for the costume party. Sonia suddenly becomes enthusiastic about attending the party, imagining that such an event would allow her "to be witty" and "make new friends." Masha wants her to dress as Dopey the dwarf, but Sonia categorically refuses to do so, insisting on devising her own glamorous costume. Masha objects, declaring that her brother and sister should wear costumes "connected to ME." Vanya, agrees to dress as Doc, but Sonia stands firm in her determination to create her own identity.

Masha looks out the window and sees Spike, still in his underwear, talking to a pretty young girl. Instantly jealous, she decides she must summon him back to the house; to get his attention she bangs on a cooking pot with a large serving spoon. Spike returns to the house, bringing the girl, Nina—who is visiting her aunt and uncle—with him. It turns out that she is an aspiring actress who longs to meet the famous Masha. Spike has invited her to the costume party, further inflaming Masha's jealousy.

Spike then performs the audition piece he has prepared under Masha's supervision, a scene in which a young actor fires his agent, a middle-aged woman with whom he has been having an affair. Nina is impressed, while Vanya and Sonia are embarrassed by the obvious parallels between the audition script and the real life relationship between Spike and their sister.

It's now lunch time. As Scene One ends, Nina returns to her aunt and uncle's house; Masha exits to take a nap; Sonia goes off to shop for a costume; and Vanya and Spike head to the kitchen for soup and sandwiches. "Come on, old guy," Spike says, "let's go chow down and you can tell more of what you thought [about my audition]."

The second scene takes place later on the same day, as people are preparing to leave for the party. Masha wears her Snow White attire, and Nina arrives dressed as a fairy princess. Feeling Nina is

threateningly pretty in that outfit, Masha insists she change into the Dopey costume that Sonia refused to wear. Meanwhile, Vanya appears as Doc, while Spike is dressed as Prince Charming.

In conversation with Nina, Vanya mentions that he has been writing a play, which Nina suggests they should read aloud on the following day. Sonia appears "*in a sparkling sequin gown that takes over the room.*" "I'm the evil queen from *Snow White*, as played by Maggie Smith on the way to the Oscars," she announces. (Maggie Smith is a famous British actress, well known for her roles in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *Downton Abbey*.) As we later learn, Sonia is referring to Maggie Smith's part in the film, *California Suite*, in which she played an Oscar nominee preparing to attend the Academy Award ceremonies. Not only does Sonia change the way she looks, but she also alters the way she sounds by adopting Maggie Smith's voice and her English accent.

Vanya mentions that their house will need a new roof, which prompts Masha to reveal that she is actually planning to sell the house—on the advice of Hootie Pie. So Cassandra's earlier prophecies about Hootie Pie and the house come to pass. This news leaves Vanya and Sonia stunned, with visions of winding up "out on the street," homeless—not a very festive mood to bring to a party.

Nina appears as Dopey, looking "kind of adorable." With everyone now in costume, the group heads off to the party, bringing Act 1 to a close.

As Act II begins, it is a few hours later, and people are returning from the party in a variety of moods. Masha is peeved because her costume was a dud, nobody recognizing her as Snow White. Someone thought she was Little Bo Peep, while "several people thought I was a Hummel figurine." Her vexation is compounded when Spike decides to drive Nina home, again arousing her jealousy.

Sonia, on the other hand, is elated at the success of her outfit and at the social elan she displayed at the party, where she was indeed witty and engaging.

Masha's resentment at this fact leads to sororal bickering, which soon escalates into full scale recrimination and self-pity. "I haven't lived," Sonia laments; Masha wails that, "No one loves me, I have no future, my life is over." At which point both sisters begin sobbing "violently." Eventually they subside, after which Spike returns from his ride with Nina. Masha hauls him up to bed, leaving Sonia and Vanya to brood about the looming sale of their house. "I am a wild turkey," Sonia says. "I have not lived. I am a wild turkey." To which Vanya replies, "Me too," bringing Scene 1 to an end.

Scene 2 begins on the following morning, with Cassandra sticking pins into a voodoo doll dressed like Snow White, while, offstage, Masha screams in pain with each pinprick. Cassandra is casting spells to cause Masha to change her mind about selling the house. In the course of her witchery she utters another prophetic warning, pointing out the unseemliness of romance between the old and the young, a pronouncement obviously directed at Masha.

We learn that Masha met a real estate agent at the party, whose name Cassandra overhears. At this point, she announces that there is no coffee, which leaves everyone feeling deprived. Masha goes back to bed, while Vanya and Sonia are left alone on stage. Just as at the beginning of the play they notice that the blue heron has not come to the pond. As Scene 2 ends, they are staring out the window, having,

as the stage directions tell us, "*A Chekhovian moment*" — which is to say, silent, pensive, and filled with unspoken emotion, most of it melancholy.

Scene 3 begins a short time later. Nina has arrived and Spike has finished his run. They talk about the films and TV shows they like. He is a fan of *Jersey Shore* and the *American Pie* movies; she prefers the films of Ingmar Bergman. We draw our own conclusions from this contrast.

Vanya arrives, and he and Nina discuss his play, which they are to present as a staged reading. The action is set in the future, after the earth has perished because of "Global warming." Only molecules remain, one of which is to be played by Nina.

As they leave to continue their discussion, the phone rings and Cassandra answers it. Recognizing that it is the real estate agent calling, she tells the person on the other end not to call again, and hangs up. Almost immediately there is another call, this one from a man named Joe whom Sonia met and impressed at the party the night before. Sonia conducts a long conversation with him, explaining her costume and her vocal transformation. When she asks why he is calling, she learns that he is asking her out on a date—possibly the first such experience in her life. Stunned, she agrees to meet with him, and as she ponders the implications of that decision, Scene 3 ends.

Scene 4 begins "*Later in the afternoon,*" as the play-reading is about to commence. Masha, Spike, Sonia, and Vanya take their places in the "audience" while Nina and Cassandra perform. Cassandra plays a weather forecaster, describing the various catastrophes that preceded the destruction of life on Earth: tornadoes, thunder storms, earthquakes. Florida falls into the ocean, while Arizona and Texas experience endless drought. Finally "3 simultaneous meteorites came crashing out of the sky and put everybody out of their misery."

At this point Vanya and Sonia leave the "audience" and join the performers, and they begin to describe the experiences of life on Earth that they miss. Spike makes a rude comment, and then takes to his cell phone, conspicuously ignoring the play as he texts a message to someone. Despite their efforts, the performers cannot ignore him, and Vanya chastises him for his bad manners. "*Upset about the weather, about losing the house, about his life, and about so many awful changes in the world and country, he explodes.*"

There follows a tirade that lasts for seven or eight minutes on stage—an extraordinarily long monolog in a play where the speeches have been mostly a sentence or two. The gist of his jeremiad is that, in his youth, the world was a far better place than it is now, principally because there were more shared experiences that bound people together in a common culture. Everybody watched the same TV shows and saw the same movies while sitting together in a theater. Now, with hundreds of television channels, and with people sitting at home watching movies alone, we have become fragmented and indifferent to one another.

When he comes to the end of his rant, Masha discovers that Spike was texting Hootie Pie. It turns out that she and Spike have been having an affair, and he is preparing to move in with her in a few days. Hurt and angry, Masha orders him to go back to New York. Having made that choice, she suddenly undergoes an emotional reversal, deciding not to sell the house after all: "I don't know why I didn't think

this earlier, but I don't have a husband, I don't have children. . . but the roots I do have are here, aren't they? With you two." With this fresh insight in mind, she takes a walk around the pond to "digest" the changes that have just occurred.

Vanya decides that he and Sonia should get jobs and help Masha pay the expenses of the house; Nina suggests working at the local CVS Pharmacy, an idea they find unthinkable. Perhaps, Sonia muses, Joe will turn out to be rich, marry her, and solve their financial problems. "B of course I mustn't get my hopes up," she reminds herself—characteristically. To which Nina responds, also characteristically, "You must always get your hopes up."

Nina leaves, forgetting to take her "music playing thing." Vanya pushes one of its buttons, and it begins to play the Beatles song, *Here Comes the Sun*. With this joyful anthem in the background, Masha returns from her "dark night of the soul," which for her was "very brief." Sonia suggests they all sit and "wait for the blue heron to come." But it's late in the day, and the heron usually comes in the morning:

SONIA. I think it'll come late afternoon today. To celebrate.

VANYA. Well we can hope.

SONIA. Always hope.

After a slight pause, Masha quotes a line from Chekhov: "Oh, Olga, let's go to Moscow." To which Sonia responds, "I don't want to go to Moscow. . . . I like it here."

On that affirmative note, the play comes to an end.

THEMES AND CHARACTERS. The play carries the audience on an emotional journey that begins with Vanya's declaration that "Hope is the result of being delusional," and ends with Vanya and Sonia affirming that there's "Always hope."

On the other hand, as the final curtain falls, the blue heron, which Sonia regards as "a harbinger of good luck," has once again—for the fourth time in the play—failed to appear at the pond at its usual time.

So the play is delicately balanced between hope, which is not the same as fulfillment, and disappointment, which is not inconsistent with hope. In fact, disappointment is in many ways the precondition of hope: without disappointments, why would hope be necessary?

As we think about the disappointments of Durang's characters, let's remind ourselves of what happens to Vanya, Sonia, Masha, Nina, and Cassandra in the plays of Chekhov and Aeschylus.

At the end of *The Sea Gull*, Nina, half mad, has come to hate herself as an actress. The man she loves has betrayed and forgotten her, and she declares that she "ought to have been killed." A moment later, the man who truly does love her kills himself.

In the last act of *Uncle Vanya*, Vanya makes an attempt at suicide and declares his life unbearably painful and hopeless. His niece, Sonia, equally miserable, has no consolation to offer, and says that they must simply "bear it."

As *The Three Sisters* comes to an end, Irina, the youngest, learns that her husband-to-be has just been killed in a duel. Meanwhile, Masha has said goodbye forever to the man she loves, and has nothing to look forward to but a life spent with a foolish husband for whom she feels nothing.

In the final scene of *The Cherry Orchard*, we hear the sound of the cherry trees being cut down to make way for a housing development. As the trees fall, Mme. Ranevskaya and her brother, Gayev, mourn the loss of their estate and of the happiness they once knew there.

Aeschylus's Cassandra is a Trojan princess and prophet who has been taken prisoner by Agamemnon, the Greek commander. She foresees his murder and her own, as well as the death of her killer, Clytemnestra. At the play's climax, Cassandra's body is wheeled onto the stage, lying next to Agamemnon, both hacked to death with an axe.

These, then, are the characters with whom Durang is constantly asking us to compare his own Vanya, Sonia, and the rest. Marx said that history is always repeating itself—the first time as tragedy, and the second time as farce. We could say something similar about the characters in *VSMS*. Looked at against the background of irremediable heartbreak that fills Chekhov's plays, or the bloody horrors in Aeschylus, the discontents, regrets, and prophetic eruptions of the inhabitants of Bucks County seem comically insignificant, completely out of proportion to the seriousness and doom of the originals. If you ask a friend with a cold how he feels, and he answers, without irony, "I fall upon the thorns of life; I bleed," you don't nod in deep empathy; you laugh at the mismatch between Shelley's romantic agony and your friend's sniffles. In a similar way, Durang draws our attention to the farcical disparities between the every-day problems of his characters and the tragic suffering of their dramatic forbears.

This doesn't mean that their pain and unhappiness are unreal—it just means that the playwright is asking us to put them in ironic perspective.

Another important theme in *VSMS* is the role played by performance and theatricality in shaping people's lives and in exposing the truth.

It is thanks to the transformative power of her costume—and her assumed voice and accent—that Sonia discovers an alternative, more charismatic identity, and encounters unprecedented possibilities in her emotional life. Suddenly, like Keats's stout Cortez, this unloved fifty-year-old woman finds herself staring with a wild surmise at an unexplored world: the dating life. As Vanya says, "you found a different part of your personality and you released it. . ."

Cassandra's spells, incantations, and prophetic tirades are also modes of performance. She makes ritualized gestures, enacts dance-like movements, intones long speeches in verse, and pronounces melodramatic forecasts of doom. And all these forms of theatrical behavior do, in fact, reveal truths about characters and events that threaten the household.

And it is thanks to the performance of Vanya's ecological melodrama that Masha learns of her lover's infidelity. The play's the thing wherein is caught the conscience of Spike—or at least the truth about his shabby behavior. From this revelation flows the affirmative ending of *VSMS*, with Masha realizing that

her real roots lie in Bucks County, a recognition that leads her to reverse her decision to sell the family house.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How important is it to know about the plays of Chekhov and Aeschylus in order to get the jokes in Christopher Durang's play?
2. Does Cassandra show the same degree of "realism" as the other characters, or does she embody some other kind of dramatic style?
3. Does Spike's name make him different from the other characters? If so, how?
4. What effect does Sonia's costume have on her behavior? Have you ever worn a costume? If so, did that affect your behavior or your personality? How?
5. What effect does Vanya's long monologue have on your opinion of his character?
6. Why does Masha want everybody to dress up as a character from the Snow White story?
7. What do you think will happen between Sonia and Joe in the long run?
8. Will the blue heron show up again? Why? Why not?
9. What do Spike's and Nina's tastes in film tell us about them as characters? Who was Ingmar Bergman? What is *Smiles of a Summer Night*?
10. Did you like Vanya's play? Why? Why not? Are meteorites related to "global warming?"