

Dramatist fixes on cynical, Chekhovian works

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human characters. His plays tend to focus on familial relationships and their boundaries of communication.

"His plays appeal to you on a real level," Kay Vivian said. "You think (the characters) are this average family. But there's all these undercurrents in their lives, and they can't talk about it."

Robert Vivian's play "Something Is Wrong" exemplifies this tone of uncertainty. The story revolves around a middle-class family vacationing in their summer house in northern Michigan. As the play progresses, the characters drink more and more, revealing that something is profoundly missing from each one's life.

Vivian based the play off the experience of vacationing with his own

family.

"There's this urgency to pack a lot of emotional energy into this short time. Frankly, those vacations are more exhausting than relaxing," he said.

Another often-produced Vivian play, "Our Own Marguerite," tells the bitter, stark story of a working-class couple. The husband, who used to cheat on and beat his wife, has been

physically incapacitated by a construction accident. The wife is left to care for the shell of a man she bitterly resents.

The blunt, black reality of Vivian's plays shocks those who know him.

"People always say, 'You look like such a nice guy. Where do you get that stuff?'" Vivian said.

Because of his play's disturbing nature, Vivian's parents rarely come to see them performed.

"They keep asking when I'm going to write something lighter," Vivian said.

Given Vivian's typical subject matter it comes as no surprise that his favorite playwright is Anton Chekhov, a Russian writer known for the enigmatic troubles of his characters.

Vivian especially appreciates Chekhov's subtlety and his focus on middle-class families.

"With Chekhov's characters, you're watching them, and it doesn't seem like anything is happening at all, but their interior lives are tumultuous," Vivian said.

In fact, seeing Chekhov's play "The Cherry Orchard" planted the seed of a playwright in Vivian.

Vivian didn't always plan to be an author. During his college years, he played baseball in Oklahoma and at UNL. It wasn't until he began to attend the University of Nebraska-Omaha that he devoted himself to the study of English. Then, he spent a semester studying in London — an experience that changed his life.

"I saw plays every single night," Vivian said. "It was a totally new world that I had never been exposed to."

While in London, Vivian saw a production of "The Cherry Orchard."

"Intellectually, I didn't follow it. Emotionally, it took my breath away," he said.

A year later, Vivian found himself writing dialogue.

"I think we all deal with voices on some level — voices from the past.

Drama is the most direct way to deal with those," Vivian said.

But despite the traditional call of New York theater society, Vivian decided to stay in Omaha. And despite his physical distance from the hub of activity, he has had success getting his work produced.

Being an author of plays is a bit different than being an author of novels or poetry. It isn't enough to get published. Playwrights want to get their work performed.

So when Vivian sends out a new script, he sends it to actual theaters, hoping they will consider it for an upcoming season.

Vivian regularly sends his work to two New York theaters, the Theatre Studio and the Manhattan Class Company.

But New York isn't the only place to see Vivian's work. This June, Omaha's Blue Barn Theater will present Vivian's "Something is Wrong."

And according to Vivian, living in Nebraska has fostered his artistic growth.


"I think it can either make or break you," Vivian said. "You must forge your own kind of voice in Nebraska. There isn't a tremendous network of theater, with some wonderful exceptions like the Blue Barn and UNO and Creighton. You're pretty much on your own. It's a strange kind of blessing in a way."

Vivian believes that living in Nebraska helped him avoid the trends and criticism his fellow playwrights in New York may be susceptible to.

"I guess I embrace obscurity. I haven't been exposed to major criticism. Criticism during a writer's formative years can make you pretty neurotic. Luckily, I've avoided that."

Vivian said living in Nebraska and having his plays produced in New York was the best of both worlds.

"You can go out there, see them performed, and then come back to your life," he said.



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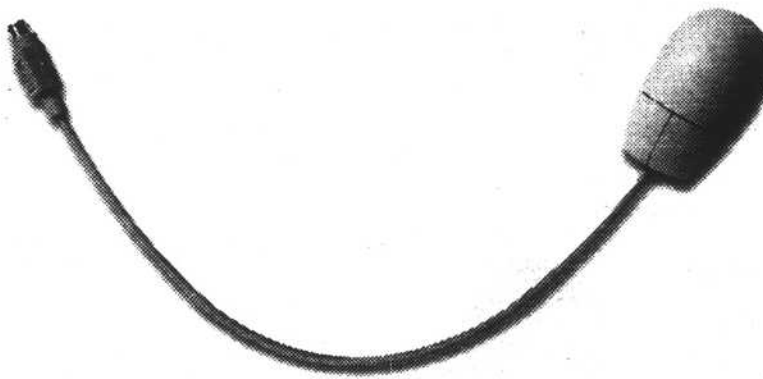
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