



Charles Pasternak stars in Santa Cruz Shakespeare's one-man production, "Vincent." Credit: Davis Banta / Right Hand Creative

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

# Two brothers, one actor: Charles Pasternak shines in Santa Cruz Shakespeare's 'Vincent'



BY JANA MARCUS April 28, 2026

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Santa Cruz Shakespeare turns to the letters between Vincent van Gogh and his brother Theo in "Vincent," exploring the legendary artist's life marked by passion, struggle and vision. It is an intimate, solo-actor production anchored by a commanding performance from Charles Pasternak. Jana Marcus writes in her latest theater review, asking us to reconsider not just the artist, but how we choose to see artists at all.

Vincent van Gogh is synonymous with artistic genius. His work is revered, and his story is mythologized. His paintings are reproduced endlessly – from museum walls to coffee table books. Their bold color and restless energy are instantly recognizable. But during his life, he sold just one painting. He was ridiculed and labeled "crazy" for seeing the world too intensely. That tension between who Vincent was and how he was perceived sits at the heart of Santa Cruz Shakespeare's quietly compelling spring production of "Vincent."

Written by Leonard Nimoy, "Vincent" is a one-man play drawn from Vincent van Gogh's letters, based on the play "Van Gogh" by Phillip Stephens. Shifting from Vincent's public myth to his private reality, the piece is told through the voice of Theo, Vincent's devoted brother, who recounts the artist's life through their correspondence while reflecting on the man behind the work. Theo is more than a narrator. He is caretaker, witness and interpreter of a brother whose brilliance and suffering were inseparable. Through his eyes, Vincent emerges not as a distant legend but as a fragile, searching soul driven by faith, doubt and an unrelenting need to create.

**If you go**

**Who:** Santa Cruz Shakespeare  
**What:** "Vincent"  
**When:** Through May 10  
**Where:** Veterans Memorial Building, 846 Front St., Santa Cruz  
**Tickets:** [Click here](#)

Premiering in the early 1980s and later adapted for television with Nimoy in the title role, "Vincent" has endured mainly in intimate theater settings. Its spare structure places full weight on an actor's ability to sustain both narrative and emotional depth. It is a piece that lives or dies on performance, demanding stamina, precision and emotional transparency.

Santa Cruz Shakespeare Artistic Director Charles Pasternak takes on the formidable task of carrying the solo piece. He delivers a performance nothing short of riveting. Tasked with embodying Theo while conjuring Vincent through the letters, he moves between the two with an ease that feels almost alchemical. His Theo is grounded and deeply felt – a brother trying to make sense of a life that refused to settle. Almost imperceptibly, Pasternak slips into Vincent. His posture twists. His voice sharpens with urgency, giving shape to the artist's longing, frustration and fragile bursts of hope.



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This is Pasternak's show. He rises to it with striking authority, delivering a commanding performance that feels lived-in rather than performed. It is as if the boundary between the two brothers dissolves in real time for us. His control of pacing is notable. He allows moments to land without rush, trusting stillness as much as speech.

Carrying a solo piece is no small feat. What makes Pasternak's work exceptional is how he layers the storytelling. As Theo, he grounds the narrative with clarity and emotional truth. As Vincent, he allows flashes of volatility and tenderness to break through. The moments are never overplayed and always earned. The transitions are seamless, and the

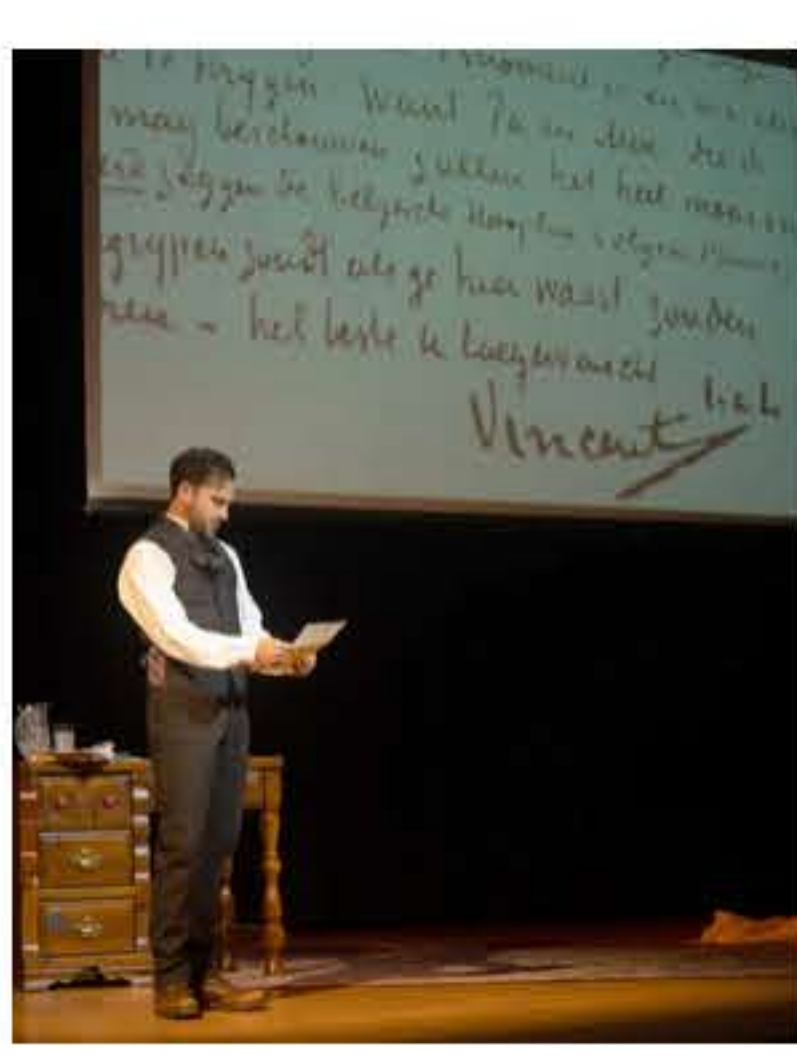
emotional arc carefully built. It is a nuanced, deeply considered performance that holds the audience in sustained attention.

The production leans into simplicity, and it serves the piece well. The set is spare yet evocative, allowing the story to breathe. A grounded costume by B. Modern anchors Theo with authenticity. Samuel Kell's lighting is precise and understated, at times isolating Pasternak in a soft pool of light that mirrors the intimacy of the letters. Most striking are Luke Shepherd's large-scale projections, which provide a gentle visual throughline that echoes Vincent's world without overwhelming the performance.

Despite the weight of Vincent's story, the production allows space for moments of humor, often emerging through Theo's observations and the ironies of life. These touches offer balance and prevent the piece from settling into a single emotional register.

But it is one idea that lingers most. As Theo reflects on his brother being labeled "crazy" while living with fierce compassion among the poor, he turns the question back on us: What do we want our great artists and thinkers to be? Must they conform, behave and present themselves like everyone else? Or is the work itself enough?

It is a question that resonates well beyond the stage. In a culture still quick to categorize and contain what it does not understand, "Vincent" pushes gently but firmly against that instinct. It suggests that what we often pathologize – intensity, sensitivity, difference – may be inseparable from the very qualities that make great art possible. Through Theo's eyes, Vincent emerges not as a distant icon, but as a man whose intensity may also have been the source of his vision.



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There is no over-the-top spectacle here. The production chooses restraint. It trusts its actor, its text and its audience.

That trust pays off. "Vincent" seeks not sympathy but reconsideration – not only of Van Gogh but of how we see creative genius outside the norm.

What if the very thing we try to soften or correct is what gives the work its meaning?

Sometimes, the art is enough.

In this case, it is more than enough, making "Vincent" a powerful production not to be missed.