

Bringing Russian Theater to Texas

By [John Freedman](#)

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Ever since Graham Schmidt encountered the plays of Anton Chekhov, he has been a man on a mission.

And several trips to Russia later — including earning an MA degree in Russian studies at the University of Texas at Austin and completing a nine-month residency at the Moscow Art Theater school in 2008 — Schmidt is still on a roll.

In recent years in Austin, he has directed three of Chekhov's four major plays, as well as Lyudmila Petrushevskaya's "Cinzano." His production of "The Cherry Orchard" in 2009 was an award winner for excellence in acting, while his production of "The Seagull" was mounted at Off Center, best known in Austin as the home of the popular experimental Rude Mechanicals company.

During a break on Friday in a series of readings of new American plays at the Wordbridge playwriting laboratory in Clemson, S.C., Schmidt talked to me about the deep tradition of staging Chekhov in Russia and how it differs from other countries, including the United

States. One would expect him to know what he is talking about, since he is the author of a thesis on Konstantin Stanislavsky's production score for Chekhov's "Three Sisters."

But, as he also explained, he is now increasingly interested in working with writers "who are envisioning the future."

Specifically, he is intrigued by encounters with new plays by Olga Mukhina, Yury Klavdiyev and Vyacheslav Durnenkov. In a commission for a European new play festival, he recently translated "Chocolate Wall," a comedy about Russians emigrating to Europe by Rodion Beletsky.

One or more of these writers are soon likely to wind up on the marquee of Breaking String Theater, a company that Schmidt has founded to explore his interest in Russian drama. The name is drawn from one of Chekhov's most famous stage directions located in Act Two of "The Cherry Orchard."

Schmidt, who turns 28 on July 6, is particularly interested in "unpacking" Mukhina's "Flying" at the present moment, although he also finds the plays of Klavdiyev intriguing.

To hear more of the director's thoughts about Chekhov, Klavdiyev and Russian theater in general, click on the picture below.

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