

Seeing and Hearing Russian Drama in the United States

By [John Freedman](#)

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Robert Faires has been an actor, director and, significantly, a forward-looking theater critic at the Austin Chronicle in Austin, TX, for over 30 years. For the last three years he has had the unique opportunity to contemplate the riches of Russian drama thanks to a New Russian Drama Festival that has been mounted by a young director named Graham Schmidt at a theater called Breaking String.

Faires calls the work of Breaking String "exciting," and adds that it provides him and the city an "opportunity to see not only classic Russian literature but also to see what's happening on the stages of contemporary Russia."

Beyond that, he points out, it also allows audiences and artists in Austin to see how much Russian drama "reflects our own culture here in Austin."

(For the record, I disclose that I have partnered with Graham Schmidt in the organization of these festivals, both as a consultant and as a translator.)

Referring to several plays that have been produced over the years at Breaking String — Olga Mukhina's "Flying," Maksym

Kurochkin's "Vodka, F***ing, and Television," and, this month, Yury Klavdiyev's "I Am the Machine Gunner" and "Martial Arts" — Faires notes that in every instance the setting of the plays, while feeling very Russian, "could also be in Austin."

He finds that Russian and Austin artists share an "unfettered imagination."

All kinds of rules applied to 20th-century drama, he declares, adding immediately that they don't any more. "We can have something that is realistic for the first 75 percent of the play and then the last 25 percent becomes some breakthrough of imagination."

In regards to Klavdiyev, whose two short plays run in Austin under the common title of "Strike" through Feb. 16, Faires points out an intriguing parallel with Sergio Leone and his genre of Spaghetti Westerns made in the 1960s and '70s.

Like the Italian-Spanish-European director Leone, Klavdiyev "absorbed" American culture and "reflected" it. "He internalized it," Faires notes, and found a way "to bring it back out in a way that is personal to him."

"It is interesting for Americans," Faires says. It is "a double mirror" that reflects "ourselves and not ourselves."

The productions of "I Am the Machine Gunner," a shared exploration of violence and war between a grandson and a grandfather, and "Martial Arts," a violent comedy depicting a ten year-old-boy taking on and beating the narco mafia, are only the second to be mounted in the United States. Both were originally developed by David M. White (the adapter of "Martial Arts" in English) and his Generous Company, and both went on to full productions in Baltimore and other cities in 2010 and 2011.

This makes the productions at Breaking String even more significant because it suggests they are capable of finding a sustained life on American stages.

Johnny Meyer, an Austin-based playwright and veteran of the war in Afghanistan, spoke emotionally about the power and authenticity of Klavdiyev's plays during a discussion following the performance on Saturday. Referring specifically to "I Am the Machine Gunner" he said, "I wouldn't want to write a play like that, but I am sure glad somebody else did."

To hear more of Robert Faires' astute comments on drama and theater in Russia and Austin, go to the [video](#) chat I recorded with him on Friday evening as he sat in a chair on the set of "Martial Arts."

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