

Russian Theater in Austin, Texas

By [John Freedman](#)

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The  **Moscow Times**

"Moscow Now, Here," the headline states in the Austin Chronicle; "The New Russian Drama Festival opens a hotline to the culture of Russia today."

That is a lead-in to a story about what one man, Graham Schmidt, has been up to for two years now, bringing Russian culture, theater and drama to Austin, Texas. This weekend he kicked off the second annual festival with three days of events that were highlighted by the English-language premiere of Maksym Kurochkin's play "The Schooling of Bento Bonchev." It all happened under the umbrella of Breaking String Theater, a producing organization that Schmidt founded in 2007 and named after a line drawn from Anton Chekhov's play "The Cherry Orchard."

(Please note that I translated "The Schooling of Bento Bonchev" and have been a consultant for Breaking String Theater since the first New Russian Drama Festival took place in 2011.)

"Over the last couple of years we have started to find a niche" in Austin, Schmidt told me in the wee hours of Sunday morning following the second performance of "Bento Bonchev."

Numerous "prominent people attend and participate" in the activities of the festivals, which have presented the work not only of Kurochkin, but of Olga Mukhina, whose play "Flying" enjoyed its English-language premiere last year.

Schmidt calls his work on "Bento Bonchev" "fantastic," in part because he was able to have Kurochkin on hand for the final dress rehearsal and first performances, which occurred on Friday and Saturday. "It was a dream experience having the playwright in the room," he explained. Kurochkin made several practical suggestions that the director and his cast incorporated in the performance at the last minute.

"Bento Bonchev" is, in Schmidt's description, "a romantic comedy with a twist. Max imagines a world in which love does not exist." The play, he declares, "has a great deal of depth through its lightness and humor." It runs Thursdays through Sundays until March 31 at Austin's iconic Off Center.

But Saturday had been a full day for other reasons as well. In the afternoon James Loehlin presented a raucous staged reading of Kurochkin's early play "The Right of the Captain of the RMS Carpathia," and Liz Fisher offered a wicked staged reading of the writer's satirical "Vodka, Fucking and Television." Both plays were translated by Wyoming-based theater artist John J. Hanlon. Following those events but preceding the evening performance of "Bonchev," Austin Chronicle editor and critic Robert Faires led a panel that explored the interaction of current political affairs with the theater scene in Moscow.

Faires told me afterwards that he could sense an affinity between Kurochkin's unorthodox approach to playwriting and the adventurous spirit that exists in the Austin theater community. Over the last 25 years, he said, Austin theater artists have become highly skilled in writing and producing new, experimental works. As such, they seem to approach Kurochkin's quirky, genre-busting dramas with enthusiasm and respect, rather than with the confusion they sometimes evoke.

Schmidt touched on that in his description of Kurochkin's "Carpathia." Both bemused and impressed by the play's scope and range, he called it a "visionary play, a fantasy about an imaginary ship captain" who apparently exists simultaneously across the entire spectrum of time and "is everyone's father."

To hear this and many more comments by Graham Schmidt on Kurochkin, "The Schooling of Bento Bonchev" and Breaking String Theater in Austin, watch the video above.

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