

A Director in Austin Discovers Russian Drama

By [John Freedman](#)

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Liz Fisher came around to Russian drama by way of rejection.

"I had read a lot of Chekhov before I worked with Graham Schmidt, but I didn't like him at all. I now know it's because the translations are bad," the Austin-based actor/director told me recently during a conversation on Skype.

Since that time in 2008, Fisher has performed in three plays by Anton Chekhov, all translated and directed by Graham Schmidt, the founder of the Russian-themed Breaking String Theater in Austin.

Fisher has come a long way since Schmidt changed her mind about Chekhov. On Thursday, she will open her own production of Maksym Kurochkin's "Vodka, Fucking and Television" at Breaking String.

I know why this event is taking place. I was present at its germination.

Fisher presented a hugely successful staged reading of the play during Breaking String's annual New Russian Drama festival in March this year. The audience spent most of the reading doubled over in laughter. When it ended, I'm pretty sure I was the first to approach Schmidt and Fisher and say they had to turn it into a full-fledged production. I don't mention that to plug my prescience; I say it because I remember people lining up behind me to say the same thing. It was an excellent piece of work.

Kurochkin himself stood nearby and smiled the enigmatic smile of a happy playwright.

"I love the way he tells stories," Fisher told me last week. "I love Kurochkin's irreverent, wacky sense of humor. I love that beautiful thing he does with language. He has the simplicity of Chekhov and the paradox of Tom Stoppard. He does that without breaking a sweat."

"Vodka, Fucking and Television," which Breaking String calls VFTV for short, was written in 2003 and first staged by Yury Urnov in Moscow at Teatr.doc in 2006. The English-language translation by John Hanlon was published in TheatreForum magazine in 2008. Following a student production at Towson University in 2009, Fisher's rendition at Breaking String will be the first by a professional company in the United States.

The play tells the highly comic story of a writer suddenly realizing that he is aging and that his work isn't getting any better. In a desperate move to turn things around, he summons his favorite vices — the three elements of the title — and informs them that he will be forced to reject one outright. Two vices a writer can juggle; three is one too many.

Not surprisingly, Kurochkin's title has occasionally caused a stir. Over the years, editors at The Moscow Times have variously censored or bravely stuck by the full title in articles I have written. Fisher told me about one woman in Austin who received an e-mail advertisement for the show and angrily demanded in an open letter to be removed from the theater's mailing list.

Fisher, whose "day job is producing," sees another side to the matter.

"That title is dead fucking sexy," she said with a big laugh. "When I saw that, I said, 'Ooh, I want that one!'"

Irony aside, what drew Fisher to the play was the story it tells.

"This play is not only for theater people looking for theater in-jokes," she explains. "Max's story is so accessible. It could be about a writer, it could be about a startup entrepreneur. The point is that the hero has these three challenges that he must respond to. It's whatever it is that keeps us from doing what we need to do."

Fisher, who grew up a "military brat," knows a thing or two about juggling responsibilities. She has accomplished a lot in the 13 years she has called Austin home. According to her [website](#), she has been the program coordinator for the University of Texas at Austin's Shakespeare at Winedale program since 2008, while performing in some 40 plays and a half dozen films.

She says Austin, with a highly active and innovative theater culture, is a great place to present unusual international work.

"For all the hippie attitude in Austin," she declares, "people here are highly educated and sophisticated. We have been watching what happened with Putin and that helps us take a hard, sometimes uncomfortable look at our own situation."

"People here have been interested in the Pussy Riot story," she continues. "They respond in heightened political times like these."

But VFTV isn't about politics, at least not directly.

"There is so much more than just words on the page in this play," Fisher told me. "It's fun!"

There will be a live [webcast](#) of the play's performance on Dec. 8 at 8 p.m. That would be a 6 a.m. wake-up call on Dec. 9 for potential viewers in Moscow.

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