



**Breaking String Theater Company**  
Proudly Presents...

# Gusev

By Anton Chekhov  
Adapted and Directed by Graham Schmidt  
With Choreography by Erica Gionfriddo

August 13 - 29  
At Salvage Vanguard Theater

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## FROM THE DIRECTOR

I first encountered this story in college, and through several years of staging and studying Anton Chekhov's work I have grown more fascinated by *Gusev's* crucial role in the evolution of the author's world view. *Gusev* was written in 1891, one of two stories published immediately after Chekhov's return home from the island of Sakhalin, a Russian penal colony off the coast of Siberia. Reading about Chekhov's three months and three days on the island, where he provided aid and conducted a census of the resident convicts in a place that comes as close as any to hell on earth, cast new light on Chekhov's intent. His rage at the conditions that led to Gusev's needless death became more palpable, his expression of the sanctity of human life, more emphatic.

This spring, as the creative team assembled and we grasped through the fog toward our eventual production, I was most certain of what I did not want. I was determined not to reprise the restrained Chekhov, the patrician poet of twilight Russia whom so many know through thick, naturalistic, worshipful stagings of his full length plays. Instead, we wrestled with Chekhov the impressionist, Chekhov the iconoclast, Chekhov the radical.

The story also synced up with my artistic capabilities and ambitions. I wanted to push beyond rationality and text, into gesture, image, and embodied knowledge. *Gusev* presented the perfect challenge in that regard, with its fever dreams, mystery, and soaringly majestic, almost cinematic conclusion.

Erica Gionfriddo's choreography came to play a defining role in the production, and pushed our depiction of *Gusev's* imagination and harrowing encounter with death to new expressive limits. Julia Smith's shadow puppetry allowed us to more vividly probe the mind of a character whose experience, while as rich and detailed as Hamlet's, expresses himself more through image and emotion than through words. Gabrielle Randle's counsel, judgment and sensitivity to Chekhov's ideas proved indispensable assets from an early point. And I was privileged to reunite with cherished friends and collaborators, and forge other new friendships through this absolutely delightful process. The artists assembled here are among the best in Austin, and I am the better for everything they've taught me.

It is a rare thing for an entire creative team to find themselves so in sync from an early point. I believe that, despite *Gusev's* difficult subject matter, we took continuous joy in this process because we found a vision for the production to which we could each connect in an extremely personal way. For that I am grateful, and tremendously proud. I am also grateful to my parents, and to my brother Andy, who passed away on April 7, 2014, and to whom I dedicate my work on this production.

- Graham Schmidt, Director, Adapter & Producer

## FROM THE DRAMATURG

*When you see a dead man wrapped in sailcloth somersaulting into the water, it is a shocking realization that the bottom lies several miles below, and you cannot help thinking that you too might die and be tossed into the sea.*

- A. P. Chekhov to Alexey Suvorin, 9 December 1890

These words come from one of many letters Anton Chekhov wrote describing the final leg of a long journey. He'd departed Moscow in the spring of 1890. At 30 years old, he was a practicing physician, and one of Russia's most celebrated fiction writers. Shaken by his brother Nikolai's death from tuberculosis, Chekhov determined to abandon literature for a time, and take seven months to visit Russia's harshest, most remote prison colony, Sakhalin. He would conduct a census there, and document the convicts' suffering. He traveled overland to Sakhalin, then sailed home. His route took him south from Vladivostok through the Sea of Japan, the Indian Ocean, through the Suez Canal, and finally the Black Sea port of Odessa. He was a changed man, haunted by what he saw, and with a much clearer idea of the cruelties human beings are capable of inventing for one another. On the return voyage, he witnessed a burial at sea, and later described it in the letter cited above. This experience was the seed of his 1891 story, *Gusev*.

What is the value of human life? This is the question that Chekhov asks us in *Gusev* and that we've been asking collectively for the last few months as we dialogued with everything from Ta-Nehisi Coates to The Gospel of Mark. In this quest, we were careful not to reify the character of *Gusev*. He is neither hero, nor villain. He is a nineteen year-old boy, lonely, uncared for, and far from home. His dreams are made of that uniquely human stuff that transports him outside of his reality sometimes to something greater, sometimes to his most base self. Chekhov's story forces us momentarily out of the 24-hour news cycle, where the lives and deaths of nineteen year olds are chum for two-legged sharks. With *Gusev* we are taken away from the immediacy and gratification of the blue light of our screens and toward the blue abyss of uncertainty that lies miles below the ocean's surface. *What is the value of human life?* Take a moment to stand on the bow, feel the hot humid air, and contemplate with us.

- Gabrielle Randle, Dramaturg & Assistant Director

## CREATIVE TEAM

**Jenny Alperin (Dancer)** began advanced performance training at State University of New York at Buffalo, from which she graduated Magna Cum Laude with a BA in Dance in 2013. Since then, Jenny has worked in Austin as a teacher and performer. After dancing with Verge Dance Company for one season, Jenny teamed with her sister and close friend to found NunaMaana Immersive Dance Theater, a company focused on immersive and experiential dance productions. When not rehearsing, Jenny teaches dance and fitness classes at Ballet Austin, and underprivileged elementary school children with the nonprofit company, Leap of Joy. She is excited to perform in *Gusev* this summer. A huge thanks to Graham and Erica for guiding the cast through this process so smoothly.

**Sergio Alvarado (Sailor #1)** is a native Texan that has been seen and heard all over the country. He has an MFA from UMKC, where he also studied with the Commedia del Arte International school of Physical Theatre. His last adventure on the stage was Armado in *Love's Labour's Lost* with Present Company. He has performed with Breaking String before and has enjoyed the challenges of this current project with his fellow cast mates. Much love to his beautiful wife and daughter!

**Zac Crofford (Priest / Technical Director)** is an actor, puppeteer, theater technician, designer, and general roustabout. He has worked extensively in Austin, and he can be seen regularly with any number of companies including Trouble Puppet, Salvage Vanguard and The Exchange Artists. You may have seen him this year in a number of places: resurrecting sad, Chekhovian zombies; fighting divine puppet wars throughout time; and portraying a giant baby leading you on jungle adventures to sacred temples. Other places too, I'm sure. In addition to his work onstage, Zac is involved with a number of organizations who strive to foster support for theater in Austin, including the Austin Scenic Co-op and the B. Iden Payne Awards Council. Thanks for supporting what we do.

**Brock England (Soldier)** is an actor, producer and director and has been active in the Austin arts community since he took up residence in 2004. He's overjoyed to be making his debut with Breaking String. Recent stage credits include two seasons touring with the live-action graphic novel *The Intergalactic Nemesis* (Timmy, Dr. Webster), Penfold Theater's *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street* live radiocast (Fred Gailey, Mr. Shellhammer), and Hidden Room Theater's original practices production of *Rose Rage* (Queen Margaret of Anjou), for which he won the Austin Critic's Table award for Best Actor in 2013. When not staying active with theater and film, he enjoys running, working on his motorcycle(s), and sailing.

**Ia Enstera (Set Design)** has been designing sets and costumes for theatre and film since the mid-1990s, and has been a part of some estimated 100

productions thus far. You may have seen some of her previous set designs with Breaking String, Salvage Vanguard, St. Edward's University, Hyde Park Theatre, Hidden Room, Austin Shakespeare, Texas State Opera, Capital T Productions, Zach Scott, and Sky Candy. She has been the recipient of numerous design awards by the B. Iden Payne Committee and the Austin Critics' Table. Ia would like to thank Stacy, Elias, and their four furry family members for keeping her grounded and (somewhat) sane.

**Robert Fisher (Sound Design)** is a sound designer, musician, and performance artist with Rude Mechs as well as Creative Director of Audio Art & Science, a company specializing in voice production for professional entertainment and commercial products. Robert is a company member of Hyde Park Theatre and Audio Lead for the children's theatre program, Kid's Acting. At SVT, Robert was the Sound Designer for *Thr3e Zisters* and a sound designer/musician/performer for *From The Pig Pile*.

**Pam Friday (Costume Design)** It's been a busy summer for Pam. Not content to laze about in her time away from her Hill Country Middle School drama students she has been busy costuming Summer Stock Austin's *Tortoise and Hare*, as well as *Guys and Dolls*. Pam is happy to be working again with Breaking String and this wonderful creative team and talented actor/dancers. But also a bit sad since this is the last time she and Ia will be collaborating for a while. Coming up is the next installment of Glass Half Full's *Missionary Position*. Lots of love to her supportive family. Keep supporting theatre in our schools! Xoxox

**Natalie George (Lighting Design)** is a designer, producer, and artist based in Austin, TX. She is the founder and Executive Producer of Natalie George Productions, an award winning lighting designer, and is Manager/Producer for Leslie Carrara-Rudolph (Sesame Street's Abby Cadabby) and her show Wake Up Your Weird. After studying technical theater at St. Edward's University, Natalie worked as a freelance lighting designer for corporate events and stage performances throughout the city of Austin and beyond. The Austin American-Statesman says, "The play of shadows orchestrated by Natalie George's breathtaking light design is worth the trip in itself." She was honored with awards for "Best Lighting Design" by both the Austin Critics Table and the B. Iden Payne Awards for the 2010-2011 season and again from the ACT for the 2014-2015 season. Since 2005 she has also been the resident lighting designer for the Nation Puppetry Conference at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in CT. Natalie's artistic contributions don't stop here. She has been instrumental in the growth of the Fusebox Festival, working as the festival producer until 2014. Natalie left FB to continue expanding her skills and vision by producing her own new works. Producing credits include the short film, *The Runner*, which was selected by the Austin Film Festival to be screened in 2011 and new plays *Sad, Sad, Sad* and *spacestation1985*. Both plays were workshopped in Austin and New York. She is currently working on a new web-series called FUN CLUB and new play, *The Sun and Moon Project*. While she enjoys working in other cities,

Natalie's love of all things Austin keeps her rooted here. To this point, Natalie will use Austin as home base for her budding production company, Natalie George Productions. [www.nataliegeorgeproductions.com](http://www.nataliegeorgeproductions.com)

**Erica Gionfriddo (choreographer)** is a dancer, choreographer, and somatic researcher experimenting with how and where bodies—and humans—connect, questioning what is safe and possible within our interactions. She co-founded the multimedia dance company ARCOS, where she serves as Executive and Associate Artistic Director, as a forum to freely pursue these themes and expand her understanding of diverse artistic mediums. Erica holds a BFA in Dance Performance and Choreography from Shenandoah Conservatory, where she represented the program in Spain, Taiwan, and at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Professionally she has performed the repertoire of choreographers Anna Sokolow, David Parsons, Robert Moses, Gail Gilbert, Arturo Fernandez, and John Lehrer, among others. Erica uses her understanding of the physical and energetic body as a certified GYROKINESIS®, GYROTONIC®, and Pilates Mat trainer to inform her nuanced movement vocabulary and expansive use of space, as well as to identify the needs of her students. She has been commissioned by Moorehead State University, Shenandoah Conservatory, Motion X Dance DC, InterTOURdansa, Breaking String Theater, among others. Erica serves as adjunct lecturer at the University of Texas at Austin Department of Theatre and Dance, and was awarded, along with her ARCOS co-directors, residency at prestigious programs: Playa Fellowship Residency (OR), UCROSS Foundation (WY), and the Kimmel Harding Nelson Center for the Arts (NE). Her extensive work with ARCOS includes commissions from SITE Santa Fe, Currents International New Media Festival, and earning Mervyn Stutter's "Spirit of the Fringe" award at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

**Andrew Hatcher (Production and Stage Manager)** is a stage and production manager, musician, properties designer and graphic designer. Credits include numerous works with Breaking String Theater, Salvage Vanguard Theater (SVT), Doctuh Mistuh Productions, Fusebox Festival, OUTsider Festival, Texas Performing Arts, Austin Playhouse, Mary Moody Northen Theatre, Transit Theatre Troupe and the Music Department at St. Edward's University (SEU). Andrew is a graduate of the Theatre Management program at SEU. He also serves as the Associate Company Manager of SVT. Most recently at SVT, he stage managed the award winning world premier of *Thr3e Zisters*. Up next he'll be seen back on this stage for Trouble Puppet Theater's *Frankenstein*, puppeteering for the first time ever! He's very thankful to the entire creative team and cast of *Gusev* for being so supportive and hard working on this production. He would also like to thank his mom and Alé Gracia for keeping him sane, and his new kitten, Lemon, for being so cuddly.

**Keith Machekanyanga (Gusev)** is a second year BFA in acting Major. Keith was born in Zimbabwe Africa and moved with his family to the United States in the year 2000. As he grew up he began performing in high school in the Dallas

area while playing football. Most recently, Keith performed in *The Pillowman* as Detective Tupolski and *A Streetcar Named Desire* as Stanley Kowalski. As he continues as an undergraduate, Keith desires to continue learning as an actor.

**Amy Morrow (Dancer)** is a teacher, choreographer, and consultant based in Austin and Tel Aviv. Her Hiraeth Portrait Series of film, music, and dance collaborations has been presented in Tel Aviv, New York, India, Puebla, México City, Austin, Fort Worth, Dallas, Tulsa, Albuquerque, Birmingham, Huntsville, and Houston. Morrow serves as the company administrative manager for the award winning Idan Sharabi & Dancers Company based in Tel Aviv, Israel. Certified by Ohad Naharin, Co-Artistic Director of the Batsheva Dance Company, Morrow travels internationally teaching Gaga, her repertory choreographic labs. She currently serves as adjunct professor at the University of Texas in Austin while directing TBXS [ Toolbox Series ] workshops hosting and collaborating with professionals such as Manuel Vignoulle, Jesse Zaritt, Kira Blazek, and Deborah Hay. The shard of Morrow's niche is nurturing local and international independent artists cross-culturally via opportunities to create, reflect, and grow in their communities.

**Stephen Price (Pavel Ivanych)** was last seen as the King of France in 7 Towers' production of *All's Well That Ends Well*. After returning to the stage from a long hiatus, he appeared as York in *Richard II* and Ariel in *The Pillowman*.

**Gabrielle Randle (Assistant Director, Dramaturg)** is a theater director and non-profit professional who is passionate about social justice, storytelling and creative cultural exchange. She graduated from Stanford University with a dual degree in Drama and Sociology. She has directed, devised, stage managed, and produced professionally across the United States, including: Los Angeles, Washington D.C., and New York City (Off-Broadway). She has also created work internationally in South Africa, Uganda, and Italy. Randle is currently a M.A. student in Performance as Public Practice at The University of Texas at Austin.

**Graham Schmidt (Director, Adapter, Producer)** founded Breaking String Theater in 2007 to direct and translate Chekhov's plays. Since then, he's found himself producing international theater festivals, commissioning and developing new works from writers in Austin, Moscow and New York, and enjoying the company, expertise and collaborative energies of the best artists in this wonderful town. Graham is thrilled to begin his MFA in Theater Directing this fall at UT-Austin.

**Julia M. Smith (Projection Design)** is a collaborative theater artist and educator who graduated from Towson University's MFA Theatre program and also holds a BFA from New York University's Experimental Theatre Wing. Her performance and design work has been seen throughout Baltimore/DC area, Chicago, New York, New Orleans, Texas and Eastern Europe and has been recognized by the Austin Critics' Table, B. Iden Payne Committee, The Austin

Chronicle, The New York Times and Eastern Europe and Slavic Performance Journal. Recently Julia performed in Basil Twist's *Rite of Spring* at Lincoln Center, she puppeteered for another season of *The Good Night Show* for Sprout Network, and recently finished designing and directing shadow puppets for a production of *Sweeney Todd* at Towson University.

**Hunter Sturgis (Sailor #2)** is a 3rd year BFA Dance major at UT Austin. His most recent performances include *Wildness* by Kate Watson-Wallace and *Independence Day* by Sunny Shen in Dance Repertory Theatre's 2015 spring concert. Hunter is excited to begin his 3rd year at UT by being more involved with Austin's dance/art scene. After graduation, he hopes to continue dancing as well as feature his own work.

**Reagan Tankersley (Sailor #3)** is a recent University of Texas graduate enjoying his first year in the Austin theater community. He most recently appeared in *Love's Labour's Lost* (Present Co.). When he's not on stage, he's in the wings as a lighting technician, most recently as designer for *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (Penfold Theatre Co.) *Gusev* is his first production with Breaking String Theatre.

### Special Thanks

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**BREAKING STRING THEATER** was founded in 2007 as a platform for staging Chekhov's full-length plays. In the ensuing years, through partnerships with Fusebox Festival and the Center for International Theater Development, we staged international theater festivals focused on the trends in contemporary Russian theater practice, and collaborated with some of Russia's most celebrated playwrights. We also found a passion for commissioning and developing new work by talented American playwrights. The name "Breaking String" derives from Chekhov's mysterious stage direction from Act II of *The Cherry Orchard*:

*Suddenly, as if from the sky, the sound of a breaking string, dying away, forlorn.*

# BREAKING STRING



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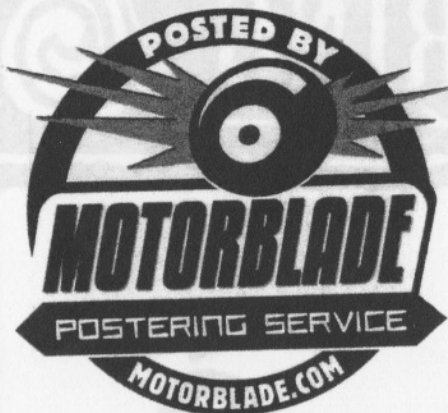


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