

# SumSum<sup>2</sup> – eine grenzenlose Liebes- und Sprachverwirrung

(“SumSum<sup>2</sup> - A Borderless Confusion of Love and Language”)

Production report by the dramaturg Henning Bochert

## **THE PLAN**

Eberhard Köhler and I suggested the play *SumSum* by Laura de Weck to Theater Erlangen and *Teatr Pokoleniy* (Theater of Generations) in St. Petersburg as literary material for the first coproduction within the framework of a long-term international cooperation because we were interested in investigating cultural strangeness using the example of Russia and Germany in this work. In *SumSum*, the borders – state borders, language barriers and different cultural identities – are also continuously mirroring lines and sources of friction for desires and projections. The production intended to mirror and present the contents of the text material in the working process across these same borders.

In order to allow audiences in both countries immediately experience the other, strange, perspective, we required two production strands – one Russian and one German. With the consent of the playwright, we created two German–Russian versions from the German-English original (one Russian-German, one German-Russian; translation: Galina Klimowa).

In January 2010, the application for funding of the project by the Wanderlust fund of the German Cultural Foundation received a positive decision. Eberhard Köhler took charge of the Russian portion of the production (SUM<sup>RU</sup>) in St. Petersburg. The German director had a history of 4 years and 7 productions at Teatr Pokoleniy. The ensemble had produced the Russian premiere of Laura de Weck’s first play „Lieblingsmenschen“ (“Favorite People“) in St. Petersburg in 2008 with great success, also directed by Eberhard Köhler. At that time, this was his first collaboration with the playwright. In July 2008, Laura de Weck saw a performance of *Lieblingsmenschen* (*Moya lubimaya 2soffka*) in St. Petersburg and became closely acquainted with the Teatr Pokoleniy ensemble and its repertory during a one-week visit.

Valentin Levitskiy of Teatr Pokoleniy directed the production component at Theater Erlangen (SUM<sup>DE</sup>). He had been a member of the ensemble for years and had already directed some plays, including ones by Samuel Beckett.

Valentin Levitskiy and Eberhard Köhler had worked together on a regular basis in the past, and, in Teatr Pokoleniy productions, Valentin Levitskiy often worked as an assistant and interpreter.

The two partner theaters composed a very mixed international team with members coming not only from Russia and Germany. Thus, the costumes were designed by the Berlin designer team “von Quitzow“ (Viola Werling and Anna Stübner), Danila Korogodsky (Russia and USA; artistic director of Teatr pokoleniy) designed the set, the technical director in St. Petersburg was Jeffery Eisenman (USA) and the Erlangen production involved German and Swiss technicians and actresses from their own ensemble. Swiss musician Reto Senn participated in the rehearsal process

both in St. Petersburg and in Erlangen and contributed live music during the performances.

The two plots:

Sum<sup>DE</sup>: a Russian man visits Selina, a German.

In Erlangen, Valentin Levitskiy cast the piece with two Russian actors (of Teatr Pokoleniy) and two German actresses (from the Erlangen ensemble).

Sum<sup>RU</sup>: Urs-Peter, from Switzerland, visits Alina, a Russian.

In St. Petersburg, Eberhard Köhler directed the play with two German speaking actors and two Russian actresses (from Teatr Pokoleniy).

Amongst themselves, the women spoke the respective language of the country where they rehearsed.

## **OBJECTIVE**

According to our concept, each production strand was to bear a very idiosyncratic artistic signature, necessarily formed by the two directors' different cultural backgrounds and their experience in the respective other country. Social codification, emotional context and mentality were to render a different form to both halves of the production and the same text in differing conditions was to lead to completely different stories. At the end of the rehearsal process, both parts were to be intertwined to form one single theatrical event - *SumSum<sup>2</sup>*, which would include some scenes with all actors present (airport scenes), which would - in the course of the performance - present the entire text to the audience in their own language, be it Russian or German, and which would place the same plot in two different stories next to and within each other in a way that the contrasting effect would make the audience experience the dialectics of equalities and differences in a unique way.

The sources of misunderstandings that often lie below the threshold of perception was a special interest of ours. When we can't interpret the behavior of others, it often leads to irritation and wrong interpretations lead to aggression and/or offense. Certain behavior may mean something different in the context of the other culture, and in dealing with each other, one needs to be particularly alert and prudent. These self-observations were to enhance the actors' imagination for the situations and actions in the play.

## **QUESTION OF HEAT**

After one and a half years of preparation and three months of production at the time of this report, our work was rewarded with a strong reception at the St. Petersburg premiere and the satisfaction of the audience during the twelve performances there. All of the performances were sold out, despite the heat wave in St. Petersburg and two TV features and three splendid reviews discussed the work.

“The creators of this play only needed simple materials to relate this eternal and beautiful love story. It's almost sad how simple. We already discussed the cardboard boxes and curtain, the chalk and the lighting.

But the sounds! While one is humming, the other is barking, the third is using a kitchen pan for a drum, someone else is starting to sing... Sax and electrical guitar show up as accompaniment – and here you have a delicate harmony, a symphony of loneliness and love, mutual understanding and unfortunate disunity.”

(quotation from the review by Maria Brusovani)

The most troublesome part of the work was the joining together of the production components that had been prepared in St. Petersburg and Erlangen. We had thought up a project that would produce two different halves because the difference was what we were most interested in. It was an essential part of the idea that we did not know in advance to what extent, in what form and exactly how these parts would differ from each other. When the entire team came together in Erlangen in early June, we consequentially needed to first view the results of the two rehearsal processes before being able to decide what shape the composition might have. We were merely able to think about possible formal combination solutions. For example, it was fairly obvious that it wouldn't be feasible for the evening to assume the running time of two full-length productions. Gluing the two parts together back-to-back didn't seem to be the right solution, either. The aspect of lingual intelligibility for the respective audience was a decisive factor, and here we had to experiment to find out what was feasible and what was not. As it happened, we found that our first ideas for the combination worked much better than we would have thought.

Still, we had underestimated the total amount of work required so that we weren't able to attempt nearly as much as we had imagined by until the opening in Erlangen. The technical installation took much longer than expected. The seating on two sides of the stage, for example, made it necessary to hang twice as many lighting instruments as usual for productions in the "Garage" space of the Erlangen theater and every attempt at a different approach to a scene entailed extensive technical rearrangements which had to be in place in order to be able to properly judge the sequence. At this point, I would like to specially recognize the technical team for their hard work and tireless efforts!. The second and third performance in Erlangen were able to make up a little for parts that didn't quite fit together smoothly or were too long at times during the premiere performance. Nevertheless, this is the part of the production that was conceptually the most experiment and it was successful; the concept worked.

Despite all of the complication, the impression persists that the evening bears great potential. It is the encounter of two theaters from Germany and Russia, the clash of different traditions and cultures which can only be hinted at. The fact that some exciting things happened during the preparation can be read about in the production blog, but this cannot be seen on stage anymore. By way of a contrived *SumSum* story, everything really worth telling ends up being concealed. Instead of the intercultural exchange actually experienced, retold selection of old prejudices are retold.

(Quotation from: nachtkritik.de, June 24, 2010)

The result: clichés are far-fetched and often simply cause more confusion than necessary. With this realization, eight weeks of rehearsal flew by, but not without a trace. Still, "stage-fright is not subject to culture nor language, it is a global feeling", explained the multicultural ensemble jointly before the opening. (...)

But, and this is ultimately the key to success, they all find a way to communicate at the end of the day. With only a few words, they attempt to find out, if and how their dream of happiness together can be realized. They see: in the *SumSum* universe, there is always a way to communicate.

(Quotation from: Russland aktuell, June 24, 2010)

An enchanting theatre, in the two actresses playing Selina alias Alina (Gitte Reppin and her quasi Russian double Anastasia Toshcheva) especially convince with their acting. Their respective lovers (Patrick Serena and Vladimir Postnikov) do master the game of love, but as men they are rather helpless with the subtle "game of love". A wonderfully cranky "theatre without borders" ending on a yearning note that earned a lot of ovations that it can count on for St. Petersburg as well.

(Quotation from: Donaukurier, June 29, 2010)

In Petersburg, we were able to continue the Erlangen experience and proceed with compression and reduction even more courageously. The bilingualism on stage proved much less an obstacle to intelligibility than anticipated; moreover, we were able to rely on the remaining theatrical instruments more than expected. In order to make the evening more intelligible for the now prevailing Russian audience, we needed to practically turn the production inside out, so to speak: the order of the scenes was changed, in part.. In addition, Danila Korogodsky, together with Eberhard Köhler, had been obliged to design a completely different stage for the space in Baltiyskiy Dom in St. Petersburg than for the “Garage” venue in Erlangen. While the set design in Erlangen followed the architecture of the Garage – two pits with “sand: granulate, transparent sliding doors and the audience on two sides of the stage – the audience in St. Petersburg was seated frontally facing the stage. In Erlangen, the stage design provided for a horizontal movement of the stage elements, whereas the “border installations” in St. Petersburg were able to move vertically toward the audience and away from it. The stage in Erlangen was predominantly black as was the space itself, while in St. Petersburg white or very bright colors prevailed, complete with signal forms and colors. In addition, a type display cabinet situation made from of two elements provided the feeling of isolation again, a room inside the room. The production was adjusted to these circumstances within a very short period of time.

After fire protection measures had been fiercely enforced throughout Russia, Theatre Pokoleniy had suffered the loss of its prominent venue inside the wall of the Peter and Paul fortress in January 2010. However, for *SumSum<sup>2</sup>*, it was able to rent a space at Baltiyskiy Dom which first had to be converted into a theatrical space. This was a stunning coincidence as the partner theater in Erlangen was facing tough challenges as a result of immense requirements to invest in fire protection measures in the same period. This, together with considerable budget cuts, bore down heavily on both the operation of the Erlangen institution and the planning of the repertory well into the next season.

Thanks to support by the Goethe Institute and private guests, a portion of the audience that understood German or both languages remained with the production in St. Petersburg even after the opening. In Erlangen, we hope that the remaining performances will be attended by a larger portion of the native Russians strongly present in that region as well as students of Slavic languages from Nuremberg, which together would increase the percentage of people in the audience who have the pleasure of following both parts of the production equally. We have been able to observe the evening gains from this.

### **QUESTION OF CULTURE**

With a production such as this, which is being funded predominantly under the theme of interculturalism, the most imminent retrospective question is, of course, to what extent cultural differences really were a crucial factor at all.

During the work, this question proved to be secondary at first glance. It needs to be rephrased: how did cultural differences surface during the process? – even then it is still debatable whether any differences observed were really of cultural origin.

In retrospect, there seems to be as many perspectives on the production as there were participants. Generally speaking, it wasn't always easy for the participants from

St. Petersburg, who work in the framework of an unsubsidized “independent” environment to meet the challenges of a German *Stadttheater*. Vice versa, the participants from Erlangen were equally challenged by working in a project that brought with it special demands outside the regular mode of operations, starting with regulated and limited working hours and the understanding of responsibilities and extending to issues like participation of the participants in finding solutions and decision in various areas.

Unfortunately, the pressure of the production left hardly any space to discuss these conditions appropriately and it would be very fortunate if an evaluation of the project could provide the opportunity for a productive exchange on these topics and if there were an interest in this.

### **QUESTION OF DIRECTION**

In the creation of the concept, we very much committed to developing a framework that would make the different signatures visible. We were and are convinced that is first and foremost the differences that we can learn from. Obviously, we place too much trust in the “natural” differences of the production components, which were ultimately not as clearly different as we had anticipated. The different signatures were not particularly visible, not to speak of the culturally relevant aspects. We were very much surprised by the result, which brought forth quite similar directional solutions for a number of situations and actions. We now believe that we should have designed the essential differences between the two production components to more strongly to provide the evening with more dimensions. In the future, we would integrate instruments with a similarly conceived work to insure that the production components would differ more strongly in accordance with the concept.

What format would have set apart the two production parts distinctively enough and made visible something about the difference? Over the course of the production, we tried interlacing the scenes to various degrees: full scenes set one after the other without interruption; half scenes presented after and within one another; dialogues of parts of scenes alternating sentence by sentence. With longer passages, the audience no longer remembers the other version, with the intensive, short-format interlacing, the spectator loses their overview – we have not yet found the optimal solution that would make the difference and also the experience and the process during the work visible.

Questions about the motivation of the female characters arose with both the Russian and the Erlangen ensembles alike. In retrospect, different concepts appear incompatible. That related to the seriousness/playfulness with which the production intended to interpret the characters and the play. Did every sentence for every character need to be intended literally or could the misunderstandings already written into the play also provide entertaining, yet equally serious solutions? Is only one way of reading the play possible? Perhaps we failed to expand upon a certain characteristic style of the production in the run-up to the rehearsal phase, a kind of humor we read in the play and we should have discussed these issues more clearly in the preparation phase to clarify them for the participants in a satisfying manner; there was no real opportunity for this during the rehearsal process itself.

Another question about another character, the priest in the St. Petersburg version, remained an issue of disagreement for a long time. The actor was present on stage as a musician as well and there was a great deal of uncertainty about the way these two functions would be connected as well as regarding the objects and symbols to be

employed. Interestingly enough, we removed the props with religious connotations from this character in the St. Petersburg half of the production. We received urgent recommendations from the Russian side to conduct modifications here in order to avoid creating an unfavorable atmosphere with the Russian audience and even more so with the critical public in Russia that would considerably harm the reputation of the partner theater. This self-censorship was immediately understandable for the German side, but it was hard to accept that such a step was necessary.

### **QUESTION OF LANGUAGE**

We consciously chose to cast the production with participants who normally wouldn't understand the other's language.

The playful claim in the original was supposed to become a real experience for both actors and audience in *SumSum<sup>2</sup>*. As could be expected, this led to misunderstandings. Interpreters were used in both parts of the production to help bridge those gaps.

This kind of work requires a very high degree of concentration and patience. However, even a translated joke often failed to be understood as such from the other side and sometimes an offence was taken before a situation could be explained. Even with simultaneous interpretation, the swift speed of a theatrical rehearsal demanded a striking amount of sensitivity and involvement from the interpreters. This was provided in varying degrees. Naturally, the process of interpretation especially put the patience of those not used to the process to an extraordinary test, which, to a large extent, was passed successfully. This process was often an excessive demand, especially at the beginning of the rehearsal phase. Unfortunately, all members of the team were not always aware that the interpreters were also available offstage, which led to some opportunities for conversation simply being avoided.

The remaining performances planned in Erlangen for October 2010 were moved to April 2011 due to bad advance bookings and illness of one of the main actors. In the process of the pertinent rehearsals, Eberhard Köhler managed to shorten the performance by 20 minutes, and according to everything I heard, participants were clearly more satisfied with this improved.

### **CONCLUSION**

All of these issues belonged right at the heart of the questions we set out to explore. Unfortunately, the production wasn't always able to achieve this goal: Transporting the differences from an area of confrontation into the realm of cooperation. Obviously, we failed to convey the open character of the production with the explicitness necessary during the preparation phase of the production. It was only in the hindsight that we became aware how critical the intention was for the production, which meant that for a long time we were not able to visualize what the evening would ultimately look like. Somehow, it seemed like all participants in the production had their own notion of what the result would need to be like. Looking back on things today, there seemed to be as many opinions about the production as there were participants both in terms of the working method and the results. We were aware that there would be conflict but we were not prepared for its extent or its intensity and, unfortunately, there was neither an opportunity to respectfully mediate the viewpoints nor an understanding for the different traditions. Difficulties arose during the process with committing and listening to each other more often than had been anticipated. It

was also not always possible to support approaches that one might not be able to fully understand.

We may have skipped a step at a very early stage that could have generated more trust here. Ideally, all participants would have had an extensive meeting as early as the fall of 2009 instead of a brief technical meeting at the beginning of 2010. That could have been an opportunity to get to know each other as well as to discuss fundamental conceptual questions prior to the crucible of the rehearsals and the organizational tasks.

A level of communication where such issues can be address must be reestablished before an evaluation phase can be performed.

Nevertheless, we completed a piece of work that led to a beautiful, successful result, despite of all the inherent and unexpected obstacles and thanks to the great commitment of all involved, which went far beyond each participant's individual limits of patience and energy. A compelling and demanding project was launched, and I look forward to the next steps on this journey.

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