

## **Across the Atlantic and Back – the journey of producing *Outside Inn***

*By Melanie Dreyer-Lude, Co-Artistic Director, International Culture Lab*

### **The Initial Idea: 1998 – Spring 2005**

I learned German late in life. As a busy artist, I was searching for an intellectual endeavor that I could keep separate from my profession. Translate: I wanted to learn German just for fun. But as these things go, I began to get ideas about how to use my new understanding of the German language and German culture in my theater practice. The travels that were a part of my new discovery of things German brought me in contact with German artists whose work was startlingly different from my own. In talking with them about the differences between German and American theater, I discovered, to my horror and surprise, that few German artists knew anything at all about American theater. How could that be? These well-educated intellectuals in charge of one of the most important arms of German culture, and most of them think we primarily do musicals on Broadway? I began to wonder what American theater artists thought about Germany and German theater. And, as often happens in my career, these moments of curiosity turned into an artistic event.

*Outside Inn* began as an idea I would summarize as thus: Instead of bringing a show to Germany to demonstrate American theater practice, or importing a show from Germany to share German theater with patrons in the U.S., what if we were to bring together artists from both countries and create something together? What would happen? What would we learn? What could we share with the audience about our experience?

I posed this idea to a woman I had recently met through a mutual friend, Gabriele Schafer. She had had some challenging experiences trying to work in Germany and indicated that such a project would be of interest to her. So full of optimism, off I went. I shopped the idea to a number of German theaters but found little interest. And then I met Stephan Bruckmeier. Stephan was a member of Theater Rampe, an independent theater in Stuttgart, Germany, focused primarily on presenting contemporary German plays. He found my idea intriguing and told me he'd love to work with me. With Theater Rampe as our resource on the German side, and the University of Pittsburgh (where I was teaching) as the resource on the American side, we formed a cross-Atlantic partnership. We agreed to commission a play that would examine cultural difference and to divide the cast evenly between German and American artists.

Stephan found a playwright (an Austrian working in Berlin) who was willing to take on the idea. He was given three of the four actors before he began, two from Theater Rampe (Stephan and another actress) and Gabriele Schafer, who was fast becoming my artistic partner in the States. After several months of writing and a false start, Andreas Jungwirth presented us with a murder mystery. The play was not what we had expected. It was, in fact, more interesting than any of us could have hoped. Andreas told a story about a disillusioned civic engineer who unwittingly participates in the death of his boss, then proceeds to steal his identity and escape to South America with his neighbor's wife at his side. It was fascinating to see American culture through Andreas' eyes. But in addition to a great story, Andreas presented us with a problem to solve. He wrote much of the play in a series of direct address monologues laden with background

information and important plot points. For an American audience accustomed to viewing a story through character-based action, I knew it would be a difficult sell.

### **Phase One – Playing Pittsburgh: August and September 2007**

In the summer of 2007, we brought the actors together – one Austrian (Stephan), one German (Petra Weimer), and two Americans (Gabriele Schafer and Roger Grunwald). We proceeded to rehearse the play in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, at the University of Pittsburgh. From the beginning, I knew that I wanted to play the play in both languages, so I asked the actors to memorize and rehearse the play twice – in German and in English. We spent five weeks working together, trying to find a way to do something none of us had done before. The German actors were uninterested in rehearsing or playing in German. The Americans had little interest in playing in English. I initially thought this was because they had played in those languages many times and speaking their native tongue was old news to them. But something deeper was occurring. We began to discover that the actors actually developed their characters differently in each language. By the time we presented the play, we were able to share with the audience the details of how differently the characters behaved in German or in English. While in Pittsburgh, the actors played three times in English and twice in German. We followed each performance with a talkback with the audience. Sharing what we had learned was important to the whole team. And when our preview performances were complete, we packed up our toys and flew to Germany.

### **Phase Two – Playing Stuttgart: September and October 2007**

While rehearsing in the U.S., I encountered only minor moments of difference in theater practice. Petra Weimer confessed to me early on that she was afraid to improvise because she had heard that theater directors in the States were tyrants about where and when actors moved on stage. But once we had dispelled those minor myths, we worked very well together. It was in Stuttgart that I began to recognize significant differences in theater practice. What struck me most strongly was the sense of family present in the process. This was partly due to the nature of Rampe and the leadership of Eva Hosemann, the Artistic Director. Eva treats her staff and her patrons as an extension of herself, including them in events of all sorts, and celebrating the theater with patrons in attendance as often as possible. The sense of ensemble, everyone working together every day just to create theater was lovely, and we enjoyed being a part of that for a short time. In the U.S., American theater artists are almost never part of an ensemble. Artists in the U.S. never have the chance to wake up every day knowing that their only job is to rehearse a play. That circumstance may be true for a period of six to eight weeks, but following the close of the show, theater artists in the States are back on the streets looking for a job. The precarious nature of working in the theater in the U.S. creates a stressed psychology that often bleeds into rehearsals and makes everyone anxious. At Rampe, where the government assists the entire team of artists to pay the rent, everyone was relaxed and easy. Problems were solvable and this was just another show. It was like being on vacation while working.

In Pittsburgh, the play had gotten mixed reviews, but everyone seemed to love it anyway. “Too long, too complicated, too many monologues – wonderful acting and direction, beautiful set, what does it all mean?” The audience was fascinated and pleased that the actors could play so flawlessly in both languages. A number of students wanted to learn more about Germany and

the German language. Pittsburgh was, by all accounts, a big success. In Stuttgart, we had trouble getting people to come and see the show. We had to cancel several performances and the performances in English could find no comers. Hmmm. What was this about? Then we chanced on something interesting. Stuttgart has one night at the beginning of the theater season where all theaters are free and open to the public. The artists then provide a sample of what the theater does for any patrons that come by. A sort of wine tasting for the theater. On this particular night, the actors weren't sure in which language they should play, so they put the question to the audience? "Shall we play in German or in English?" A brave soul suggested that the actors play in both. The actors found this a marvelous idea and proceeded to improvise a mixed-language version of *Outside Inn*. It was a hit and we then determined that mixed language was something we should continue to explore. Talkbacks are not a part of German theater culture, so we never had the opportunity to have a conversation with the German audience about their experience. It was hard to gauge whether or not our attempts to bridge cultures had been successful. And then we were invited to bring the show back to Stuttgart the following summer to present at a citywide celebration called American Days, whose mission was "to further improve and intensify the transatlantic dialog in the greater Stuttgart area and Baden-Württemberg region." And we were invited to present the show in New York City Off Broadway in October of 2008. Perhaps we were having an impact after all.

### **Phase Three - Creating a Theater Company: October and November 2007**

It soon became clear that Gabriele and I would have to find another way to fund the American end of the cross Atlantic partnership. The University of Pittsburgh had been unbelievably generous to us, but they couldn't be expected to finance every remount of this production. So we decided to start a company whose primary goal was to create international collaborations that would promote cultural understanding. International Culture Lab took up the responsibility for all American expenses for *Outside Inn* and with the creation of this company, Gabriele and I formalized our artistic partnership.

### **Phase Four – Back to Stuttgart: June and July 2008**

Our remount of *Outside Inn* for American Days in Stuttgart in July of 2008 changed in only one regard – rather than playing in pure German or pure English, we presented the play in mixed language format. The audience seemed to love it. And this version of the play allowed the actors to choose where they thought German was more appropriate for their character or where they needed to speak English. While presenting the play in Stuttgart for the second time, we were already planning the remount in New York City for the following October. I knew that a mixed-language format without subtitles would never work in the United States, even in New York City. Spanish is the second language in the U.S. and few people can speak fluent German. I also knew that the plot of the play was complicated and would be challenging if we didn't find a way to make sure the audience could understand what was going on from beginning to end. So while enjoying our luxurious remount in Stuttgart, we began to worry about New York.

### **Phase Five – New York City: October 2007 – October 2008**

The final presentation of *Outside Inn* happened in October of 2008 at one of New York's finest Off Broadway theaters – 59E59 Theaters. The Artistic Director, Elysbeth Kleinhans, had seen the play in Pittsburgh and thought it was a nice fit for her season. In Pittsburgh and Stuttgart

we had nice large theaters that accommodated our big beautiful set. In New York, our stage was reduced by 2/3 and we had to rethink everything we had done before. Rather than simply try to remount our previous production, we determined to explore the play in a more sophisticated way. Could we play the play in a mixed-language format and still tell the story? Could we use subtitles in an interesting way, making them a part of our art rather than just a practical device? Could we demonstrate the differences between American and German acting styles? How could we convey multiple locations on three different continents using a space that is only 14'x 20'? Answering those questions effectively provided the most artistically satisfying part of the New York experience for us. But the New York leg of our journey was fraught with obstacles from the beginning....

Fundraising was a challenge, to say the least. German foundations and corporations, although enthusiastic about the idea, saw our project as primarily American and weren't interested in supporting us. American corporations weren't sure what to do with a project that seemed to be centered on German culture. The New York production came up too quickly for us to apply to many foundations, leaving us wondering where to find the money. And this very dilemma – how to fund theater in the United States that isn't primarily focused on easy entertainment – is the quintessential American experience for an artist. We began to feel jealous of Rampe and wished we, too, could talk the government into underwriting our production. But money wasn't our only problem. Theater Rampe had decided at the last minute that New York would simply be too much for them during their 2008-2009 season – so we were down two actors. Then my partner Gabriele Schafer, who originated the role of Kathleen, became unexpectedly seriously ill and we had to replace her as well. With three brand-new actors, no funding, and constant worry about Gaby, we soldiered on, trying to believe that our production was an important component of the bridge-building we saw in evidence at other German-American cultural institutions.

When we opened the production on October 2, we hoped that our efforts would result in the same kind of success that we'd had in Pittsburgh. We had tailored our programming and artistic choices to a New York audience (or so we believed) and deepened our cultural and artistic discoveries. We were ready for a big success. Unfortunately, it didn't happen. The reviews were harsh. The audiences were confused about the idea of "mixed language" and were reluctant to come. The election coverage was at its peak and many chose to stay home and watch live theater on television. The economy tanked, encouraging some to save their pennies for more important endeavors. We had been hoping for a positive response from the German community. The American Council on Germany and Deutsches Haus organized a special event with a nice lineup of panelists for a post-show discussion. But responses were low, and we had to cancel it. It was heartbreaking. And confusing. We'd had marvelous success in Pittsburgh. Seeming success in Stuttgart. And we had been virtually ignored in New York, theoretically the most culturally sophisticated city in the United States.

### **Assessment : October 2008 - ?**

Two years of effort in trying to build bridges has left us with more questions than answers. Can art really make a difference in promoting cross-cultural understanding? Are Americans so conventional that new ideas in the use of language and the investigation of culture fall on deaf ears? Do the Germans even have an interest in projects such as ours, or were they just trying

to be nice? Should International Culture Lab ever try to do something like this again? We have much to think about in the coming months. It was thrilling to see my initial idea come to life. I never expected the production that resulted from it to have so many incarnations. I never expected to end up Co-Artistic Director of a company committed to promoting cultural understanding. I began the journey of this project hoping to teach artists and audiences about the true nature of what it means to be German or American. And, predictably, the person who had the most to learn about her own ignorance and false expectations was me.