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Depicting history, and making it too

'Russian Ark' was shot in one long take — an exhausting and rewarding endeavor.

By ALINA TUGEND
Special to The Times

New York

It was the middle of a Russian winter, and cinematographer Tilman Büttner had just a narrow window of daylight to do something no one has ever done before — shoot a feature-length film in one continuous take.

The film was "Russian Ark," a dreamy tableau of Russian history from Peter the Great to the present, filmed entirely in 33 rooms of the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg with 2,000 actors and extras who had never rehearsed all together. It was, to say the least, a staggering undertaking.

"Russian Ark," a Russian-German co-production that was shown at several film festivals last year, opens in Los Angeles on Friday. (It also is screening at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art on Thursday at 7:30 p.m.) It is the creation of Alexander Sokurov, a Russian who has directed numerous documentaries and feature films ("Taurus," "Moloch" and "Mother and Son").

Sokurov has said he did not wish to direct a film with no edits simply as a cinematographic stunt, but to do a film shot "as [if] it were in a single breath. ... I wanted to try and fit myself into the very flowing of time, without remaking it according to my wishes."

It was Büttner, 38, a German originally from the former East Berlin and an acknowledged expert in the use of the Steadicam — a camera stabilization device that combines the steadiness of a dolly with the freedom of movement of a hand-held camera — who was chosen to make Soku-

rov's wish come true.

Büttner, who operated the Steadicam on the movie "Run Lola Run," says he was excited from the moment Sokurov approached him.

"It was great someone had the idea and had the courage to try it," Büttner said during a recent visit to New York. "At first it was supposed to be a documentary, and as it developed, it got bigger and bigger."

Past filmmakers have dreamed of shooting one long unedited movie; Hitchcock attempted it in "Rope" but was constrained by the technology of the time. But technical advances in video — some made especially for "Russian Ark" — allowed it to happen. It was shot on compact high-definition cameras, which produce images commensurate with the shutter speed used on motion-picture film, with the image eventually transferred to a 35-millimeter negative. A complex portable rig was designed to move the camera on a Steadicam to cover 4,265 feet of the museum.

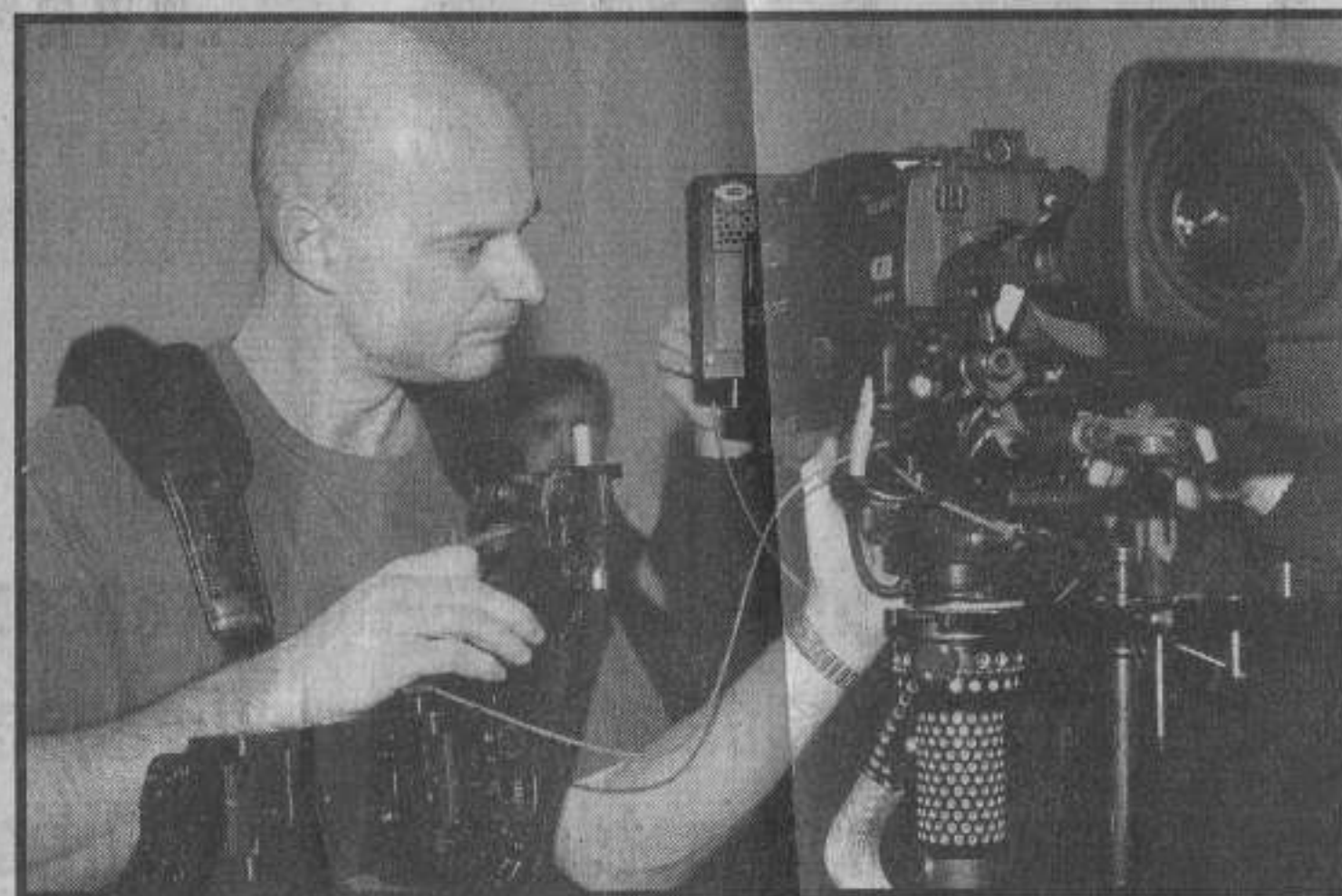
The high-definition camera made it possible to shoot in one take, but the maximum time that they could record with that method was 46 minutes — and Büttner needed almost twice that. A German company managed to develop a prototype portable hard disk recording system that could record up to 100 minutes. (The completed film runs 87 minutes.)

The catch was that because of technical limitations of the equipment, the filmmakers could not back up and record over any mistakes. Those restrictions, combined with the limited availability of the Hermitage (two days) and the famously short Russian winter days, made the shoot the equivalent of a high-wire act without a net.

"Films are usually shot in 30 to 40 days," Büttner noted. "They're like a pyramid with a large foundation — a lot can go



A MOMENT IN TIME: Sergei Dreiden, as the marquis, dances with a guest in a scene from "Russian Ark." After three false starts, the 87-minute film was captured on the fourth take.



HEAVY LABOR: "Ark" cinematographer Tilman Büttner.

wrong, but they can fix it. This was the opposite. It was like the top of a pyramid stuck in the ground. It was stuck well in, but if anything had happened, it would have fallen."

Hermitage tour guides

THE film takes the point of view of a contemporary filmmaker — whose murmuring voice is Sokurov's but who is never seen on camera — and a jaded 19th century French diplomat (Sergey Dreiden) as they invisibly meander, alternately bewildered, frightened and amused, through the Hermitage.

The film begins in the 1700s

and time-travels back and forth through Russia's past and present, with a grand-finale extravaganza of the last Great Royal Ball of 1913, shortly before the Bolshevik revolution, complete with hundreds of beautifully costumed dancers and a full orchestra.

Shooting of "Russian Ark" was set for a few days before Christmas 2001, with only about four hours of light available during the wintry Russian days.

"The Hermitage was closed for two days, one for preparation and one for shooting," said Büttner, as he animatedly told the story of those tense few days. "For 48 hours, nobody slept."

Forty electricians moved into

the Hermitage on Dec. 22 to set up lighting for the film. "We started on the 23rd of December," Büttner said. "We were supposed to start at 12, but pushed it to 1 because of problems with the camera and lighting."

Now they had three hours.

The unwieldy army of people responsible for making cinematic history fell into place. The slender Büttner, strapped into his 75 pounds of camera equipment, was tied as if by an umbilical cord to an assistant carrying 50 pounds of apparatus that recorded the images to a hard disk.

Seven other people surrounded him — two camera assistants, two electricians, Sokurov, an actor in white gloves whom Sokurov would send in and out of scenes as he felt necessary — and the translator, needed because Sokurov speaks only Russian and Büttner speaks only German.

Communication flew back and forth on walkie-talkies as Büttner moved from room to room. "It was a kind of paramilitary operation," Büttner said.

Fifteen minutes into the first take, Büttner saw himself reflected in a window and stopped. A few minutes into the second take, an actor made a mistake. During the third take, in the second room of the Hermitage, a light broke, and the room was too dark to shoot in.

"We all thought the third take

would be the one that would go all the way through," Büttner said. Because of the rapidly fading light and the limitations of the recording equipment, "The gas tank was now on reserve. This was definitely the last take."

The fourth take began.

"I was not nervous. I like these moments of tension," Büttner said. "I knew if I was nervous, it would have ruined it. I was certain we would do it. Everything was concentrated on this one point in time."

This time it went all the way through. And at the end of the film, Büttner had four minutes of video left over. The producers and actors were elated, embracing and kissing each other and Büttner.

Büttner was totally exhausted. He was in physical pain; he thought holding the Steadicam for so long had given him a hernia. In fact, he had simply pulled a groin muscle.

And the cinematographer was not satisfied with the final shot. "I'm a perfectionist, and I saw a lot of flaws," he said. "So did Sokurov. We would have liked to do it again."

But, he said, when he was on the plane, flying home from Russia to Berlin for Christmas, it hit him that he had accomplished an extraordinary feat.

Büttner still sees all the mistakes when he watches the film, but now "I'm proud of it, yes, I'm proud of the organization from my side."

John Bailey, a cinematographer on numerous films, including "The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood," "The Anniversary Party" and "The Big Chill," says that although he thinks the movie would have looked far richer and more sensual on film, as opposed to video, it was still an "amazing tour de force. It was a very, very interesting experiment," he said. "It was very different than what I expected. I thought it would be a walking tour, and it was more like a meditation on Western history. I found it fascinating."

However, Bailey says he does not think "Russian Ark" is the beginning of a trend. "Editing or montage is how you shape or focus material," he says. "My own sense is that if you do one long extended take, you're going to fall short. It's like a stream of consciousness — some of it can be very engaging and some boring."

But, he said, "I think it's an incredibly interesting try. After all, one of the ways we redefine any art form is by pushing its parameters."