

Oleg Popov: A Life as a Clown

Melle van der Velde

- **The biography of the most famous clown of all times**
- **The first book about the life of Popov**
- **Lavishly illustrated with exclusive and historic photographs**

Oleg Popov, the most famous clown of all times, has recently turned seventy-five. This year he is also celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of his career as a clown. Half a century ago this Russian clown seemed to have appeared out of the blue. Just for one brief moment the Iron Curtain was raised. Donning a yellow wig and a black and white checked cap with a daisy sticking out, Popov immediately managed to steal the hearts of generations of circus goers. After his visit to Paris, Brussels and London, he was lionised by the circus public of the whole western world. Popov would never lose that magic anymore. Popov: the greatest circus clown of all times. A legend in his own lifetime. *'Stopping? Me? Never!' he says. 'A clown dies in the ring!'*

Popov grew up in Vierobovo, a Russian village close to Moscow. His father often took him to the circus. When Popov was eight years old, his father was arrested by Stalin's KGB and deported. He would never see him again. Popov first worked as a locksmith in Moscow, later he found a job with the official state newspaper Pravda. The leaders of the world-famous circus academy discovered him during a gymnastic competition and offered him a place.

His checked cap and bulbous nose date from 1949. When performing a silent part in a film in Moscow he found what would become his trademark lying among some props. He never had the intention of becoming a clown. He was 24 and worked as a comic on the tightrope. When the star clown Borovikov suddenly fell ill during a performance in Saratov, Romanov, the circus director, told Popov to take his place. Nervously Popov assembled some material from the circus kitchen, grabbed a chef's hat, a few potatoes, some forks and pots and pans and invented a comic number on the spot. As it turned out, that number would become world famous, and Popov would never stop performing it.

Soon after he became the star clown of the Russian State Circus. In 1955 he was allowed to travel with the circus to the West. It was a triumphant tour of a man who was to become the greatest circus clown of all time. Paris, London, the United States, Japan, Korea, Australia, Canada. All over the globe the public adored him, and he received standing ovations wherever he performed. In 1981 he was awarded the renowned Golden Clown at the Monaco Circus Festival. The award was the crowning glory of his career.

The death from cancer of his wife Alexandra at the end of the 1980s, however, meant the end of his happiness. He knew that if he left Hamburg and his tour of Germany in order to return to Moscow and attend the funeral of his wife, the Russian authorities, with whom he was forever at loggerheads, would never allow him to travel abroad again. And that would have meant the end of his international career. He decided to stay put. When Alexandra was being buried, Popov did his clown number in the ring. Nobody has to tell him what sorrow means.

In the early 1990s Popov met the German Gabi Lehmann during a performance. Afterwards she asked him his signature and her telephone number. Two years later they got married during a successful tour through the Netherlands. From then on the young Gaby (30) and her idol Popov (62) not only became partners in wedding but also partners in the ring.

Today Popov is living in a delightful farmstead in Bavaria, Germany.

'There is no secret recipe for laughter,' he says. 'In the ring I am able to conjure up a childhood world. The public and I both fantasize. That's the real power of the clown. As far as the rest is concerned, laughter is a very serious subject, indeed.'

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1. Popov's youth. His father, mother and relatives. Where he was born and grew up. School. Jobs. How he ended up in the circus.
2. The start of his circus career. His number. The beginnings of his career as a clown. His career in Russia. The circus academy.
3. Breakthrough in 1956. Brussels. Oleg the flamboyant clown. Paying a visit to the Royal Family. A star is born. The magical sounds of the circus and the mysterious communist regime.
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5. Anecdotes.
6. A garage full of roubles. When people received one rouble in exchange for one dollar.
7. Popov conquers the world. Countries, continents. Meetings with the great and famous. How he used to live. Sketching circus life.
8. His privileged position in the circus.
9. Making his own props. Do-it-yourself business. His marriage. The death of his wife. Popov in the ring. The show must go on. His loneliness.
10. A show in Germany. Meeting Gabriëlla. Their marriage.
11. Popov today. What does he do? What does he want? What about the clown?
12. The opinion of his peers. Of the Russians. Of the people he met.
13. Finally: Popov the philosopher. Popov, the man. Who is the man behind the world-famous bulbous nose?

Melle van der Velde is a renowned journalist for a.o. De Telegraaf, Holland's most widely read newspaper. For six years he was the press attaché of the Great Russian State Circus when it toured Holland, Belgium and Germany. He was also Popov's own press attaché and has known him for many decades.

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