

THE MOSCOW CIRCUS!

The History

Since the reign of Catherine the Great, the circus has played an important role in the rich cultural traditions of Russia. In Russia, the circus is regarded as an art form on par with the ballet or opera, a showcase for highly skilled and creative artists.

An Englishman, Charles Hughes, is partly responsible for the huge popularity of the circus in Russia today. A renowned horseman and impresario, Hughes gave a command performance with his troupe of circus entertainers for the court of Catherine the Great. She was immediately captivated by the performances and ordered two circus rings to be built for the entrepreneurial Englishman. Hughes remained in St. Petersburg for a year before returning to England. However his performers, now admired by the Russian nobility, decided to remain behind, thus giving birth to the contemporary Russian circus we know today.

The circus became hugely popular with the Russian people in the 19th century, rapidly becoming one of the chief forms of entertainment. The Old Moscow Circus was founded in 1880, in response to the huge popularity of the art form. Quickly it became the most respected and loved circus in Russia. After the turmoil of the 1917 revolution, the founding fathers of the Soviet Union quickly recognized the circus's importance. It was a truly popular - egalitarian - form of entertainment, enjoyed by all, regardless of race, language, age, education or class. Requiring great skill, benefiting from creativity and originality, the circus nevertheless needs no sophistication.

Through the establishment of state circus schools in Moscow in 1927 and later in other major cities, the circus developed in quality and on a scale unknown in other countries, and from the 1950s on it became a highly successful cultural export, making frequent tours to the United States and Europe.

At its height, on the eve of the collapse of the Communist regime in the early 1990s, there were 70 permanent circus buildings and about 50 traveling circuses. The fall of Communism threw this massive cultural organization into disarray, and the future was at times uncertain. However, The Moscow Circus has continued to thrive, recently celebrating its 120th anniversary.

With its rich tradition and enviable reputation, the Moscow Russian Circus remains the standard by which others are judged. We are privileged to still have the opportunity to experience one of the jewels of Russia's impressive cultural heritage.