

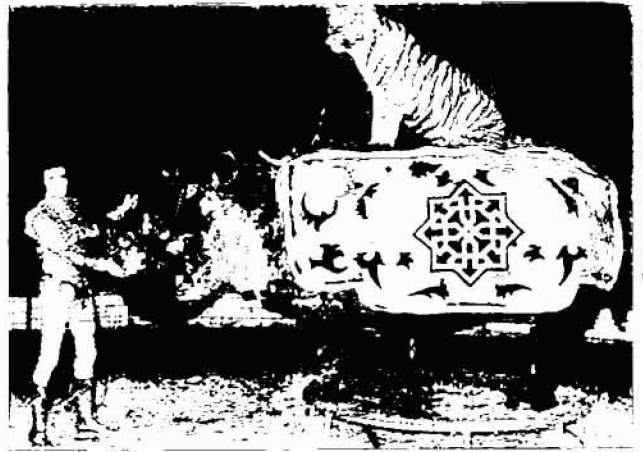
# Rhinoceroses in the Circus

Zeila, Circus Knie's famous white rhinoceros, died on February 24, 2006, aged 43, a respectable age when you take into consideration that in the wild, such an animal normally reaches between 40 and 50 years. The history of the circus rhinos is not so well known, therefore it seems to be an interesting topic.

The first rhinos, of course, appeared in menageries. All Roman emperors owned representatives of that species to be used in their circus games. After Marco Polo's first journeys and the discovery of sea routes to Asia, the first Asian rhinos arrived in Europe. On May 20, 1515, the first specimen landed in Portugal accompanied by its Indian trainer. King Manuel I exhibited it in his royal menagerie at Ribeira, north of Cintra. In 1517, he wanted to give it as a present to Pope Leon X, but unfortunately, the animal did not cope with the stress of the journey and was dead on arrival. It was stuffed, and Albrecht Dürer used it as a model for his legendary painting. Other rhinos were seen in Spain (1577) and in London (1684 and 1739).

In 1741, a Dutch captain called Douwemont van der Meer imported Clara, a young female captured in India. Loisel, the historian of menageries, tells that the animal traveled all over Europe in a wagon drawn by no less than 20 horses. She was exhibited at the fair of Saint Germain, Paris, where she was more successful than the play performed simultaneously at the Comédie Française! King Louis XV wanted to purchase Clara and had her come to Versailles, but the transaction did not take place. Clara continued its triumphant tour and took part in the festivities of the Carnival in Venice in 1751. She was shown in the arena of Verona and the Italian painter Pietro Longhi immortalized her in a legendary picture. She died in London on April 14, 1758.

Versailles zoo got its first rhino in 1770, an African male captured at the Cape. He hated pigs which he bullied as



Fredy Knie with Zeila and tigress India.

soon as seeing some, but developed a tender relationship to a goat; they lived together until the rhino died in 1773. His skin is still exhibited in the Grand Gallery of Evolution of the Museum of Natural History. To see another living rhino, our ancestors had to wait for Philippine Tourniaire's traveling menagerie towards 1830.

In the United States, the first circuses tried to acquire this sort of animal that might attract large audiences. Van Amburgh and O'Brien presented black rhinos from 1850 onwards. The most famous was Old Put, an Indian male bought by the Flatfoots, a syndicate of circus directors. He was short-tempered and killed one of his grooms. Dan Rice, the famous political clown, bought Old Put to present him at his own circus. The animal used to arrive in chains, but was then liberated. He went up some stairs and rang a bell. Following his trainer round the ring, he stole his handkerchief hanging out of his pocket and refused to give it back to him, despite the trainer's supplication. This rhino became a real star until his tragic death on August 18, 1881. The barge transporting the circus on the Mississippi was rammed by another ship and the cage with the rhino fell into the water whereupon the animal was drowned.

The Americans had to wait for the 1990 tour of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey to see another rhino in a circus ring. Coralie, a young female presented by Flavio Togni and carrying a black panther on her back. In their menageries, however, the American circuses often featured rhinos. Coliath I and II, who were the stars of Carson & Barnes's traveling zoo in the 1990s, were probably the last rhinos to be shown in that way.

In Europe, Circus Krone presented Lissi in 1917, the only rhino to travel on the old continent. She was back in 1941 with another African specimen called Kifarú.

In France, the Bougliones presented a rhino in 1933 and the Amar brothers had one in 1939. In 1985, James Carrington, touring under the name of Amar, showed in his zoo a two year old rhino called Margareth. When the tour ended prematurely, she was given to the zoo of Monaco and then to the safari park of Plaisance-du-Touch in 2001. The circus family Prein also possessed a rhino in the 1990s.



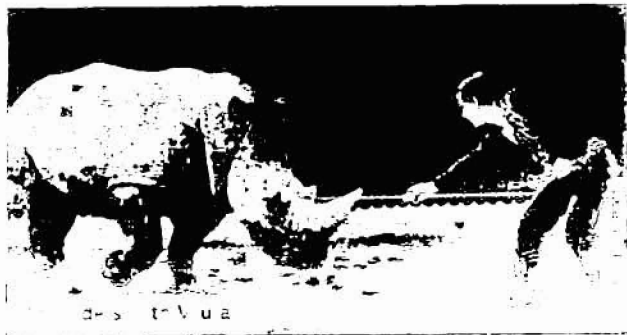


Sascha Houcke with Tsavo

Zeila arrived at Knie in the summer of 1966, replacing her predecessor Delphine. The Knies had bought her from the animal trader Ruhe in Alfeld in Northern Germany, with Bully, a male who still lives in Knie's children's zoo in Rapperswil.

In 1968, Fredy Knie, Jr. created a sensation when presenting Zeila in the show. She circled the ring and mounted a pedestal before trotting with the trainer standing on her back. In 1972, Fredy outdid his own achievement by making the tigress India ride on the rhino. Ten years later, this act was back with Sher, another tigress. In 1996, Zeila stopped tenting and became sedentary in Rapperswil. Her retirement was twice interrupted when she was back on tour in 2000 and in 2003, astonishing all specialists by her superb condition.

Fredy Knie was soon imitated. In 1978, Gerd Siemoneit purchased Tsavo, a white rhino. Trained by Charles Knie, he made his debut in Berlin on September 6, 1978. Tsavo became the first rhino to be presented in a French circus ring



des tsava

during the Gala de la Piste at the Hippodrome de la Porte de Pantin, in Paris on December 3, 1981. Following Charles Knie's departure, Tsavo was successively presented by Sacha Houcke, Gerd Koch and Sandro Montez.

In 1980, Franz Althoff bought Vautta, a white rhino that was quickly trained by Adi Enders. At Christmas 1986, they appeared in Paris at Cirque Pinder. When Franz Althoff began to operate a unit of the Moscow State Circus in 1990, he gave his rhino to a safari park.

Another rhino owner was Alberto Althoff buying Rashviki, a one year old female, from the company Joachim Raake in Neuwied, Germany, in 1987. Currently, this animal is at Circus Fliegenpilz.

The rhino is a difficult animal. All trainers agree that it only has a small brain and stays unpredictable. Normally, its path from the enclosure to the ring is guarded by portable fences and the animal is lured by some food - but God help you in any unexpected event!

In 1989, I had the opportunity to observe Flavio Togni and Hans Ludwig Suppmeier training Coralie. With a big bucket of cereals, she found her way to mount a large pedestal. The rewards were also of a tactile nature, rubbing her sides with a broom! The training sessions were calm and witnessed by some spectators.



Sandro Montez with Tsavo

We have seen many circus rhinos in Italy: In 1985, Davio Togni made his debut with Hulk from the zoo of Basel in Switzerland. It even carried a leopard round the ring on its back. In 1986, Charles Knie trained Djumba at Circo Moira Orfei, later to be presented by Stefano Orfei. Elvio Togni (1986) and Vini-cio Canestrelli (1991)-also joined the group of rhino trainers. At present, we still see Goliath at Circo Americano Faggioni, massive Kunta at Embell Riva and John, a white 18 year old male, at Medrano Casartelli.

Without doubt, the new regulations will make the rhinos disappear from the circuses: We still cherish the nostalgic sight of Zeila trotting with ease and concentrating on the heads of lettuce waiting for her as a reward on leaving the ring!

This article was originally published in "Le Cirque dans l'Univers," No. 221, 2nd trimester 2006.

