

# ON SET

## A FAIRY TALE

### THE TRUE STORY OF THE BOOK OF OLGA

**T**he *Book of Olga* is, as a matter of fact, a fairy tale. It is the story of a wealthy prince very much in love with his beautiful wife. The prince is a Russian oligarch, Sergei Rodionov, who owns banks and magazines. The wife is a beautiful 30-something blonde named Olga.

To freeze the passing time, to preserve Olga's beauty forever, the prince has privately hired several famous photographers—Helmut Newton, David LaChapelle, and Peter Lindbergh—to shoot her. But the prince was never satisfied. He wanted very sensual, if not erotic, images of his wife. Then he discovers the work of French photographer Bettina Rheims at a retrospective of her work in 2007 in Moscow. Rheims's combination of sex and psychology seems perfect to the prince.

He contacts her by e-mail and puts forth his request. Amused, Rheims answers back. A series of 30 pictures is planned. The session is to take place in Normandy, in Rheims's country house. As the date approaches, Rheims worries: She has never seen Olga in person. Will she be a worthy subject? Makeup artist, hairdresser, stylists, and assistants all arrive. The following morning a gigantic black Mercedes stops in front of the house, and the door opens to reveal a pair of long legs belonging to a beautiful, shy Olga.

Rheims starts the shoot, which will last three days.

"I love it," says the prince when he sees the 35 images Rheims prints. "Let's make a book—a book that is at least 100 images."

A second shoot takes place a few weeks later. Rheims has conceived it in black and white. It is winter, it is cold, the ambiance is not good. Olga is pouting and tired. Rheims produces 30 more pictures—still not enough for a book. She perseveres. "I felt that I was surpassing the order to reach an artistic performance," she says.

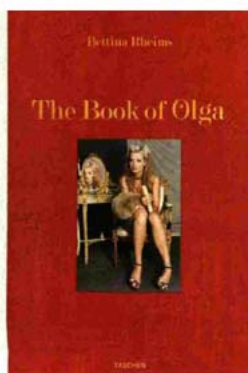
Three weeks later, an 18th-century castle is rented in the outskirts of Paris, where, unfortunately, disgruntled workers go on strike. The shoot is moved to Rheims's studio in the heart of Paris. The fabrics, decor, wigs, and clothes pile up. It will be the longest and the most creative shoot. "We had become great friends; there were no longer any taboos or embarrassments," says Rheims.

When the photography is finished, Rheims goes to her longtime European publisher, Lothar Schirmer. He looks at the pictures and turns the book down. Rheims then goes to Benedict Taschen, who jumps at the opportunity. The prince oligarch has never asked to see a single image from the selection but insists on reading the text from the sulfurous French writer Catherine Millet, who, a few years earlier, published a controversial book on her sex life as a swinger.

The fairy tale is published and priced in a limited edition: 1,000 copies, each costing \$500. The entire edition sells out in days. How nice fairy tales are when everyone is rich and beautiful. —JEAN-JACQUES NAUDET



INSIDE PHOTOGRAPHY



Left: The new book from Taschen.