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Film Discussion Group
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The White Crow (dir. Ralph Fiennes, 2018)

On Camera

Rudolf Nureyev: Oleg Ivenko: Ukrainian ballet dancer, acting for the first time on film
Clara Saint: Adèle Exarchopoulos: Won awards for *Blue Is the Warmest Color* (13)
Pushkin (trainer): Ralph Fiennes: *Schindler's List* (93), *The English Patient* (96)
Xenia (his wife): Chulpan Khamatova: *Good bye, Lenin!* (03); ethnic Tatar, like Nureyev
Sergeyev (ballet director): Nebojša Dugalić: Actor from Serbia, where *White Crow* was filmed
Strizhevsky (minder): Aleksey Morozov: Other four film credits are all Russian films
Teja (German lover): Louis Hofmann: ballet thriller *Red Sparrow* (18); *Land of Mine* (16)

Off Camera

Director: Ralph Fiennes: Third film as director; longtime Russophile and dance fan
Screenwriter: David Hare: *Wetherby* (85); *Plenty* (85); *The Hours* (02); *The Reader* (08)
Cinematography: Mike Eley: shot the beautiful, undersung British film *The Selfish Giant* (13)
Original Score: Ilan Eshkeri: Composer for concert halls as well as films; *Still Alice* (14)
Film Editing: Barney Pilling: Worked with Fiennes on *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (14)

Other films directed by Ralph Fiennes...

Coriolanus (2011) – Modernized adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedy of a Roman leader who becomes contemptuous of the people he governs and faces military opposition; Fiennes moved the story to the Balkan republics, a region he revisited by filming *The White Crow* in Serbia

The Invisible Woman (2013) – Fiennes stars as Charles Dickens, opposite Felicity Jones (*On the Basis of Sex*, *The Theory of Everything*) who played the much-younger lover of the novelist; this film got a tiny U.S. release and got lost in the Christmastime shuffle; well worth a rental!

If you liked *The White Crow*...

The Turning Point (1977) – Director and choreographer Herbert Ross, also famous for *The Goodbye Girl*, *Pennies from Heaven*, and *Steel Magnolias*, directed Anne Bancroft, Shirley MacLaine, and newcomer Mikhail Baryshnikov in this tale of two women who met as young ballet dancers; one is now fighting to keep her career, while the other abandoned it long ago

Valentino (1977) – Rudolf Nureyev attempted his biggest acting role in this delirious biography of Rudolph Valentino, the silent film star; co-starring Leslie Caron as Alla Nazimova

White Nights (1985) – Mikhail Baryshnikov teamed with Gregory Hines, Isabella Rossellini, and Helen Mirren for this Cold War story of a Russian-born ballet dancer who gets impounded by the USSR and must conspire with a former lover and an African American expat to re-escape

Onegin (1999) – Martha Fiennes, Ralph's sister, directed him in this beautiful, under-noticed adaptation of Pushkin's verse novel about a young woman, Tatiana (Liv Tyler), who finds herself besotted with an older aristocrat (Fiennes) too vain to pay attention to her feelings.

The Company (2003) – Robert Altman's second-to-last film was set within the Joffrey Ballet, following its ensemble of dancers as well as administrators as they seek to devise artistically ambitious works but also to keep their budgets healthy with crasser mass-audience productions

Mao's Last Dancer (2009) – Australian filmmaker Bruce Beresford (*Driving Miss Daisy*) directed this version of the life story of Li Cunxin, a Chinese ballet dancer who defied his country's demand that he return home from a successful and transformative tour through the U.S.

Cold War (2018) – I imagine several of you saw this recent Oscar nominee when it was released last winter, but the movie compels a rewatch. Its study of midcentury tensions—told through the story of two lovers, traversing multiple timeframes and geographic centers—offers another study of how politics impact artists, though of course the specifics don't align in every way.

Facts about *The White Crow* you may appreciate...

Julie Kavanagh, author of the biography *Rudolf Nureyev: The Life* (2011), sent the first few draft chapters of her book to Fiennes a decade before it arrived in print, hoping to interest him in a film adaptation. He was later re-approached about the same material by producer Gabrielle Tana, whose enthusiasm for ballet converged with Fiennes's longstanding interest in Russia.

Fiennes was ardent about the actors speaking in subtitled Russian and French, rather than having this story play out incongruously in accented English. He also wanted to cast a dancer in the lead, since training an actor to dance convincingly would be impossible, especially given the constraints of time and money. Fiennes did not initially expect to act in the film, even though he appeared in both of his others, but casting himself as Pushkin appealed to his financiers.

Fiennes had worked with playwright and screenwriter David Hare on *The Reader* and immediately reached out to him to write the script. Hare was most enthralled by the scenes in Paris, while Fiennes's initial investments were in the Russia sequences. They balanced each other out.

Fiennes has described his star, Oleg Ivenko, as naturally quite sunny and personable, so it marked a major shift in his performance when he learned to adopt Nureyev's arrogance. Ivenko had to learn acting, English (for on-set conversations), and to speak Russian without his Ukrainian accent, while Fiennes was learning to speak Russian. They coached each other on their sound.

Johan Kobborg, a former principal dancer at the Royal Ballet, served not only as the choreographer for the film but as an on-set consultant for filming the dance sequences, helping Fiennes discern which takes included the most pleasing movements to a trained dancer's eye and making sure the camera angles did not omit important inflections of the dancers' bodies.

Ivenko has received more offers to dance elsewhere in Russia and the world since being cast in *The White Crow* but maintains his position in the M. Jalil Tatar State Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre in Kazan, the capital city of Tatarstan. He also founded a dance school there.

Broad conversation topics about *The White Crow*...

Character: In the epilogue where the Russian agent interviews Pushkin about Nureyev's defection and his political sensibilities, his former instructor insists that Nureyev was in no way political, and instead experienced what he calls "a sudden burst of character" at the moment of seeking asylum. What do you think he meant by that, especially having seen the rest of the movie? I wouldn't say *The White Crow* sees its primary job as giving us deep, psychological insight into Nureyev's mind, and his moods can be a little blunt, to say the least—so Pushkin's description is even more surprising to me. Eager for your thoughts!

Chronology: Director Fiennes and screenwriter Hare apparently agreed from the outset that *The White Crow* should shuttle among the three different timeframes of Nureyev's impoverished youth, his initial pursuit of training in the USSR, and his epiphanic arrival in France—all framed by the *fourth* timeframe of Pushkin's interview, which happens later than everything else. What insight into Nureyev's story or "feel" for his experience did this mix of timeframes give you? Did you ever feel confused and, if so, was that confusion productive?

Dance: We might be forgiven for assuming there would be more dancing in *The White Crow*, but Fiennes maintains this was never his key interest; he approached this as a project about a self-consciously great artist choosing the circumstances in which he could honor his calling, rather than a story about the artistry itself. Do you feel it made sense that the dance sequences were relatively few and far between? Did you find they made the case for Nureyev's extraordinary talent, even though many of them take place as that talent is still developing?

Art: As an ironic contrast to that point, there are many *more* sequences in which we observe Nureyev taking in the glories of painting, sculpture, and architecture in Paris, enraptured by the art. Biopics about artists often include scenes like these, but they often work a little differently—with more dialogue in which the smitten artist-in-training describes specifically the ideas these artworks have inspired in him/her, or with edits that lead us directly from a scene of artistic encounter to a new creative feat by the main character, directly inspired by whatever s/he just observed. (Think of how often, in a movie like *Ray*, we cut from Ray Charles overhearing a sound in the world, or even experiencing a particular fight with a lover or relative, to Ray suddenly writing a new, destined-to-be-famous tune that incorporates that sound or evokes that quarrel.) *The White Crow* doesn't do this, really: we witness Nureyev's wonderment from the outside and remain curious about what specifically he is responding to in, say, Géricault's painting *The Raft of the Medusa*, or the sculptures of wrestling men. Beyond allowing us to savor the art, did these scenes illuminate Nureyev for you?

Sexuality: One of the cornerstones of Nureyev's legacy was his sexual magnetism on stage and his life, which led to many affairs with men and with women. Reviews have varied over whether Oleg Ivenko's performance as Nureyev evokes the immense erotic charge the dancer held for so many people who knew him; I'm curious what your thoughts were. The movie repeatedly chronicles Nureyev's relative indifference to his lovers (Pushkin's wife, the young German dancer Teja), while also adding a borderline-romantic attraction between Nureyev and his eventual airport savior Clara Saint, which history does not quite support. Was it clear to you which characters desired Nureyev, and which ones he in turn desired?