

Film Review: Dancing away from a repressive regime in ‘The White Crow’



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- An unflinching look at the rigid Soviet political system and how it strangulated personal freedom

TOKYO: The third movie directed by Ralph Fiennes, “The White Crow,” which clinched the Best Artistic Contribution prize at the recent Tokyo International Film Festival, follows his earlier two dramas inspired by English literature. While his debut attempt, “Coriolanus,” was based on Shakespeare’s work, his next, “The Invisible Woman,” fell back on Claire Tomalin’s book on Ellen Ternan, the actress whose secret affair with a much older Charles Dickens provided fodder for gossip in 19th century Britain. “The White Crow” takes us far away to the 1960s Soviet Union, engulfed in dirty Cold War politics.

The movie tells us the dramatic story of the famous ballet dancer Rudolf Nureyev, who defected to France in 1961. It takes an unflinching look at the rigid Soviet political system and how it strangulated personal freedom and artistic expression — factors

that have not entirely disappeared from today's world. The film explores Nureyev's birth on a train in Siberia and his fascination with ballet that his family could ill-afford. His steely resolve — which often gets derailed because of his temper tantrums — helps him master the dance form, although he goes into it late in life.

Played by the renowned Ukrainian dancer Oleg Ivanko, Nureyev, aided by one of the finest teachers of the time, Fiennes' Pushkin, springs to life with each step, with each move in a narrative that uses flashbacks, though rather clumsily. Nureyev dances with many leading companies before dying from AIDS in 1993. One of the most memorable moments in the movie is a dramatic scene at a Parisian airport in which Nureyev's Soviet handlers try to stop him from traveling to London. In those vital minutes, his friend Clara Saint (Adele Exarchopoulos) attempts to help him.

Sadly, Exarchopoulos, who with her headscarf resembles Jackie Onassis, appears painfully wooden, something that is not helped by a script that seems to bounce all over the place.
