

On “The White Crow”
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As of last night, all I knew about “The White Crow” was that it was about 23-year-old Russian ballet dancer Rudolf Nureyev’s 1961 defection to the West in a Paris airport; I hadn’t read any reviews or talked to anyone about it. Since I’d heard very little about the film — it seemed to have sunk with barely a ripple after briefly popping to the surface last spring--I wasn’t expecting much. But I’d recently read the superb biography of Nureyev by Julie Kavanagh and I wasn’t doing anything, so I thought I’ll give it a try. I could always quit on it and just be out the rental cost.

Without really thinking about it, I assumed Nureyev would be played by Benedict Cumberbatch or some such, and that the other central character, Clara Saint, the 20-year-old daughter of a wealthy Chilean painter living in Paris who befriended Nureyev and helped engineer his defection, would be played by, say, Reese Witherspoon. But no. It turned out that the 5’8”, rather short, Nureyev was portrayed by the 5’8”, rather short, and also 23, ballet company soloist Oleg Ivenko, same ethnicity, who looks remarkably like Nureyev did at that age; and that Saint was played by looks-twenty French actress Adèle Exarchopoulos, who is the spitting image of pictures of the real Saint at that time. More, when a scene was in Russia, they spoke subtitled Russian, and when it was in France, they spoke subtitled Russian and French. And I’ll be darned, it turned out that dancer Ivenko, who had never acted before, can act up a storm. All to say, I believed this film—I wasn’t sitting there thinking “Hey, they’re only shooting Benedict’s dance scenes from the waist up, although I have to give it to her, Reese is doing great with the French.”

Another uplifting surprise, what a mature, artful, insightful, and thought-provoking screenplay by major league playwright and screenwriter Sir David Hare, which included on-the-money flashbacks to Nureyev’s very meager beginnings in the far-distant

provinces. Plus, “The White Crow” turned out to be most sensitively directed by Ralph Fiennes (who also is superb playing Nureyev’s beleaguered dance teacher Alexander Pushkin), and the cinematography of Mike Eley was top rank. Great editing and pacing. Right down the line, the supporting actors were, a big point here, believable: when they were Russian, they were Russian; I wasn’t going, “I think Jonah Hill has lost some weight.” Increasingly as the film went along, I got caught up with the story; no quitting on this one.

I checked out the review aggregator website Rotten Tomatoes and it said, “‘The White Crow’ lacks the nimble grace of its subject, but as a reasonably diverting primer on a pivotal period in the life of a brilliant artist, it just about sticks the landing.” The Metacritic site, which sums up published reviews, says “The White Crow” received “mixed or average reviews.” I can only offer that those conclusions don’t match up with my experience with this film: I thought it stuck the landing without so much as a quiver, and my review is a highly respectful rave.