

Interview: Ralph Fiennes

BY READERS DIGEST
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The distinguished actor chats to Eva Mackevic about his latest passion project, *The White Crow*, working with Anthony Minghella and the importance of kindness. But he's not too happy about it

My shirt is soaking wet. It's not a particularly hot day though, and—no—I haven't been caught in the rain or sprinted to the office—I've been on the phone to Ralph Fiennes for the last half an hour. He called me from New York, where he's taking a few days off from filming, and from the moment I answered the phone and heard a frostily composed: "Hello, Eva. This is Ralph Fiennes," I knew I had my work cut out.

I'm on the phone to Ralph to discuss his third directorial venture, *The White Crow*—a biographical drama about the world's most prolific ballet dancer, Rudolf Nureyev, detailing his life from the poverty-stricken childhood in eastern Siberia to his dramatic defection from the USSR in 1961. In addition to directing the film, Ralph also plays Nureyev's teacher, Alexander Pushkin, performing the role entirely in Russian.

The film, he tells me, wasn't an easy one to make, especially from a financial perspective. "It was extremely difficult. A lot of drama is made on TV now, and this was a film with a lot of scenes in Russian and French, which is a tough sell because English-language movies are more commercially attractive in the market place. I also wanted an unknown dancer who could act the role. I suppose people were looking for global names which help to sell a movie. Not having any always makes it hard."

"Isn't it a lesson of life to learn how to wrangle one's impetuous emotions and selfish feelings? As you get older, you begin to see how your actions affect others"

It is a tad odd then that far from relishing the opportunity to sing the praises of his pet project, Ralph sounds bored and annoyed, as if he'd rather be getting his teeth pulled than having this conversation with me right now.

As we're chatting about *The White Crow*, including the intricacies of shooting heavily choreographed scenes and working with a first-time actor (Nureyev's portrayed by the James Dean-esque Russian ballet soloist, Oleg Ivenko), drawing questions out of Ralph actually feels like pulling teeth—each answer is preceded by a heavy sigh and a pause that feels like an eternity. When it finally does surface, it inevitably begins with, "It's very hard to talk about these things," "I don't know how to answer your question," or some intricate variation of the two.

I get it, though. With such a rich and distinguished filmography under his belt, Ralph can afford to be a tad capricious. After all, he's worked with everyone from Steven Spielberg to Wes Anderson, has been nominated for two Oscars and his stage credits are what any Shakespeare interpreter's dreams are made of. He is, however, best known for his menacing, villainous film roles, such as the sadistic SS officer in the war epic, *Schindler's List*, or the fearsome Lord Voldemort in the *Harry Potter* franchise.

"I look for some point of identification with a character. As an actor, if you're excited by the things that your character is doing, if your imagination is stimulated by a scene... that gives you the fuel to play the part, whether they're good, bad, gentle, kind—or evil monsters. You want to feel how it's written, I want my imagination to be stimulated by that."

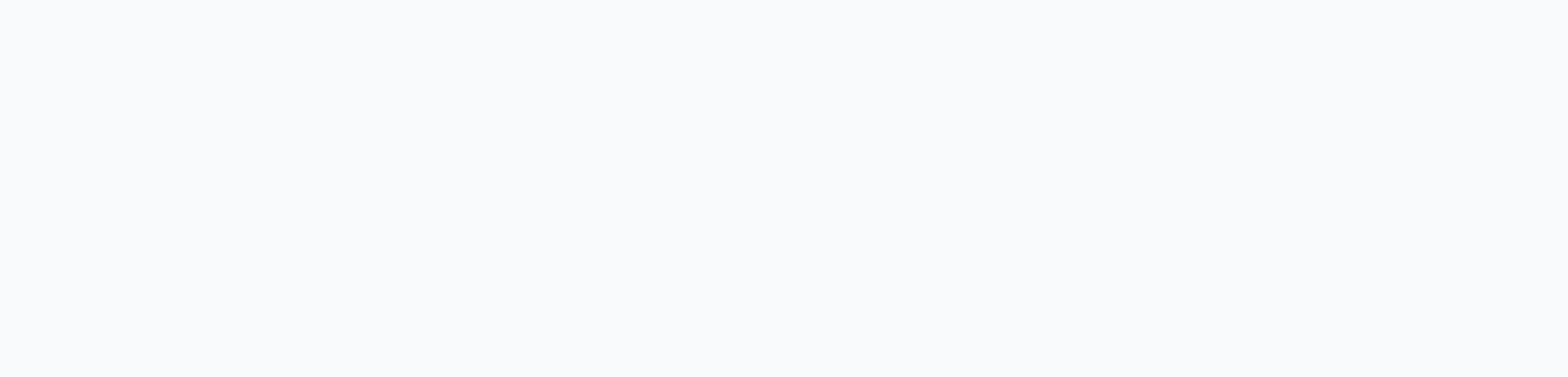
"Isn't it a lesson of life to learn how to wrangle one's impetuous emotions and selfish feelings? As you get older, you begin to see how your actions affect others"

When I ask him whether he feels more comfortable playing villains or good guys, like *The White Crow*'s kind-hearted if slightly meek dance teacher, Pushkin, Ralph practically scolds me for asking such a simplistic question: "I don't think it's healthy to think in terms of, *Am I comfortable or not*, it's more useful to think, *Am I closer to getting to some kind of truth here?*" That's what you want to be asking yourself."

I attempt to steer our conversation towards the similarities between him and the characters he plays. Are the good ones easier for him to relate to? Does he consider himself to be a kind person in general? Finally, I get a slight reaction. Ralph chuckles with grace and a hint of derision: "Well, I think that's something we should all watch out for, isn't it? You're asking me a big question... Isn't it a lesson of life to learn how to wrangle one's impetuous emotions and selfish feelings? As you get older, you begin to see how your actions affect others and hopefully you gather some kind of sensibility."

Now we're getting somewhere. Ralph reveals that his mother Jennifer was the perfect example of this kind of behaviour: patient and tolerant, she was the one who nurtured her son's interest in acting. "She was a strong believer that the child must discover things for themselves, and must be given the freedom to find the thing that they wanted to do."

He even recalls the day he told her he wanted to pursue acting: "I was doing a foundation course at the Chelsea College of Art, which I was enjoying. There was a freeing nature to that course after the conventional grammar school environment. The art school atmosphere was designed to push you to be inquisitive and curious and something about it gave me the confidence to say, 'This is what I need to do.' Once I said that to my mother, it was as if she'd been waiting for me to say it. She was completely behind it. She was really supportive of what all her children chose to do."



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Having directed his third film now, I wonder whether Ralph applies a similar method of gentle encouragement to the way he manages actors on set. "That's a very beautiful way to instruct and one that I aspire to but I know I'm quite vocal. I sometimes have to say, 'No, it has to be like this.' But I think the thing is to say, 'Yes, that's interesting but what happens if we go *here*?' One of the basic things about directing is not to close a door. You don't want to close down the confidence of an actor who's exploring and that's really important."

"The moment you bring in the word 'romantic', my doors are closing"

Having been on the other side of the camera, Ralph knows what makes a great director—he's had numerous masters to learn from over the years. As I probe him for anecdotes on the different movie heavyweights he's worked with—Spielberg, Minghella, Redford—he shares bite-sized morsels about their individual styles. "They're all very different. Anthony Minghella had a very particular, gentle, probing style. I think he genuinely wanted to see what an actor could reveal for him, and bring to a line or a moment. That's quite rare, when someone is genuinely exploring. And Steven [Spielberg] is very different. Much more vocal and direct in a very exciting way. He would say, 'Say it quicker' or 'Change the line a bit'. I could really feel his technical knowledge. And then there would be someone like Wes Anderson who would be very precise. The words written in the screenplay are the words you're going to speak. He's not someone who encourages any improvisation around the text. Wes loves the actors to do lots of different takes which I like because I get permission to reinvent a scene in many different ways. That's exciting."

Ralph could talk about directing all day. He admits that he doesn't have a great technical knowledge but says that he has found the process of learning what a lens can do to a face or a camera move can do to a moment fascinating. His private life? Not so much. The moment I allude to his dating life, he shoots right back: "I'm not going to talk about it. The tone of your question is towards my personal life and the moment you bring in the word 'romantic', my doors are closing."

"Not to worry," I say and move on to the next question, but I immediately feel the repercussions of my careless move, as Ralph reverts back to one-word answers:

"What do you do to relax?" I ask.

"I love reading."

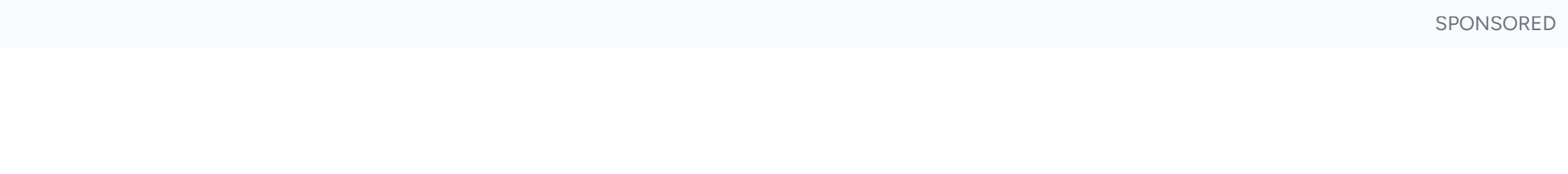
"What was the last thing you read?"

"Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*."

"Did you enjoy it?"

"I did. Your half hour is up, my darling."

And with that, the doors are slammed shut for good.



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Ralph Fiennes' *The White Crow* is out in cinemas across the UK now

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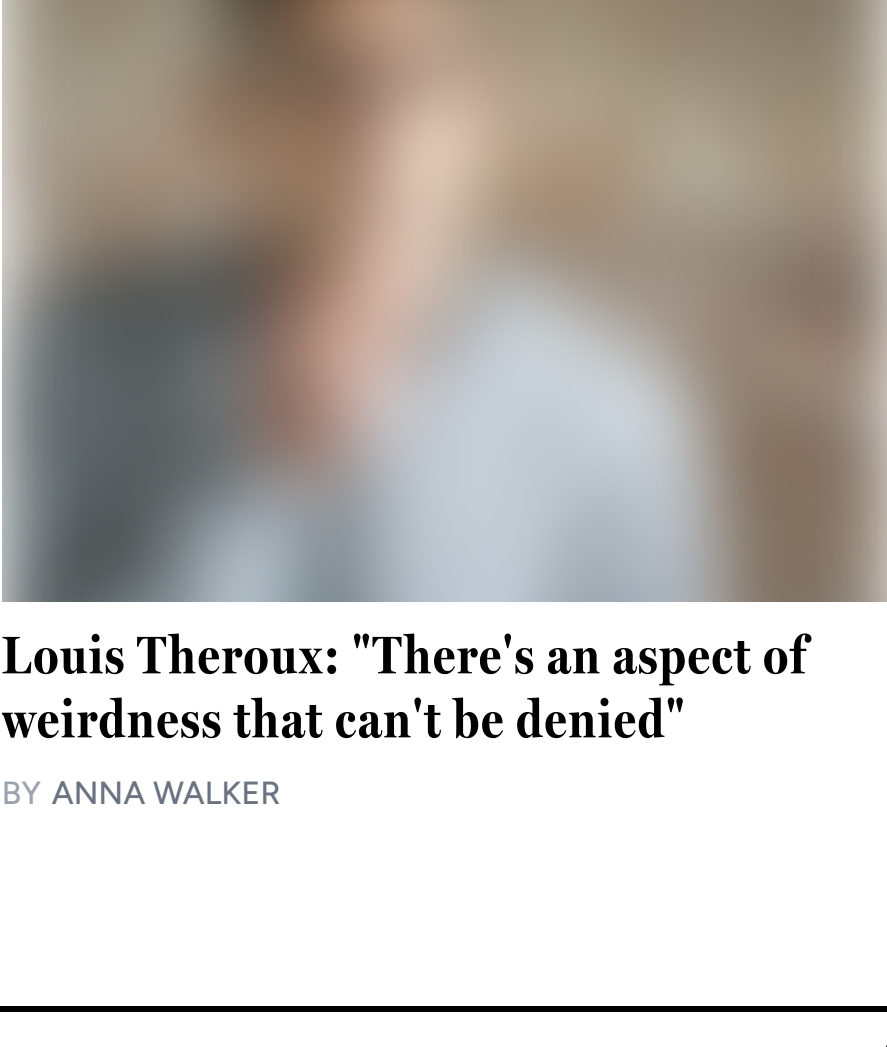
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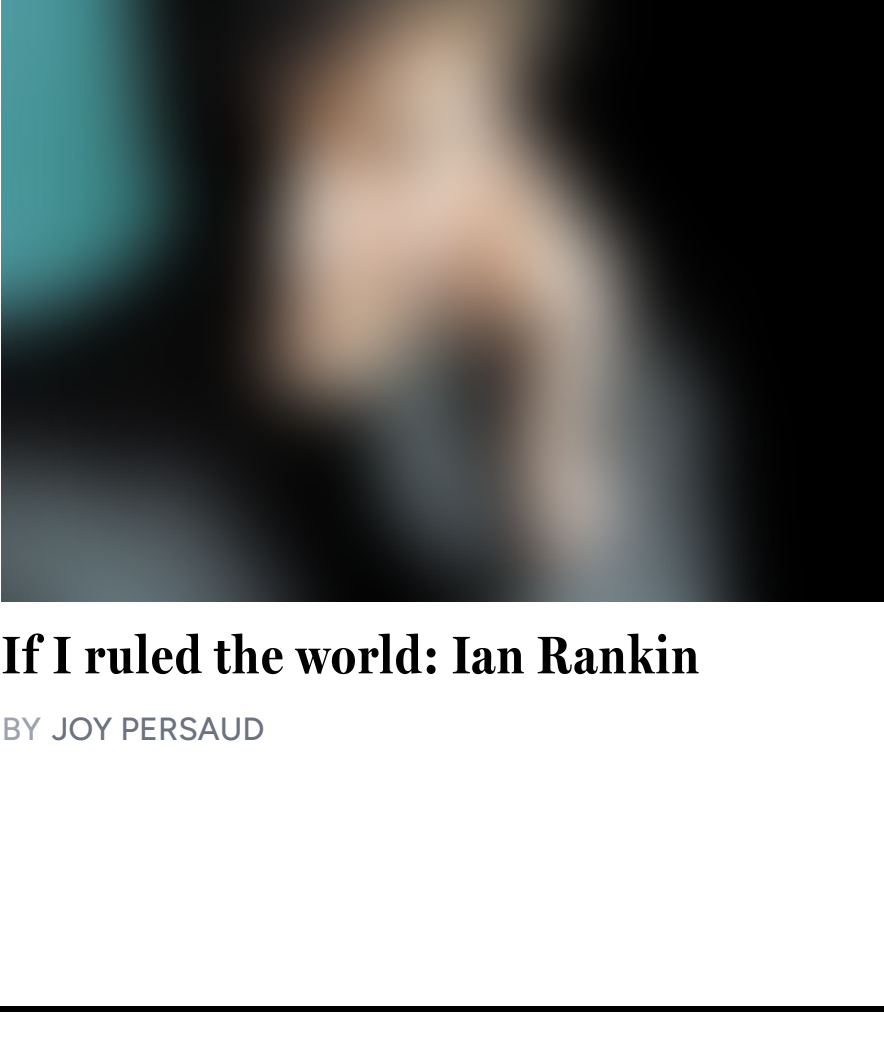
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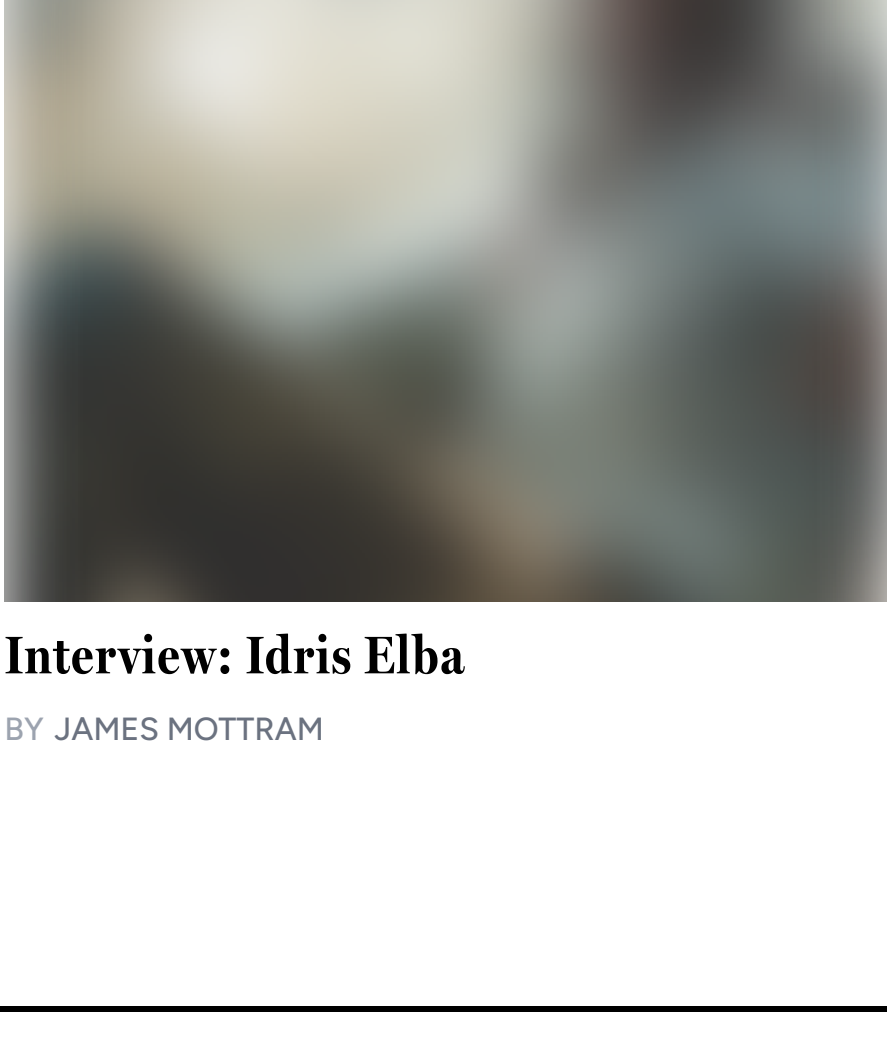
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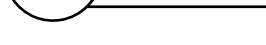
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