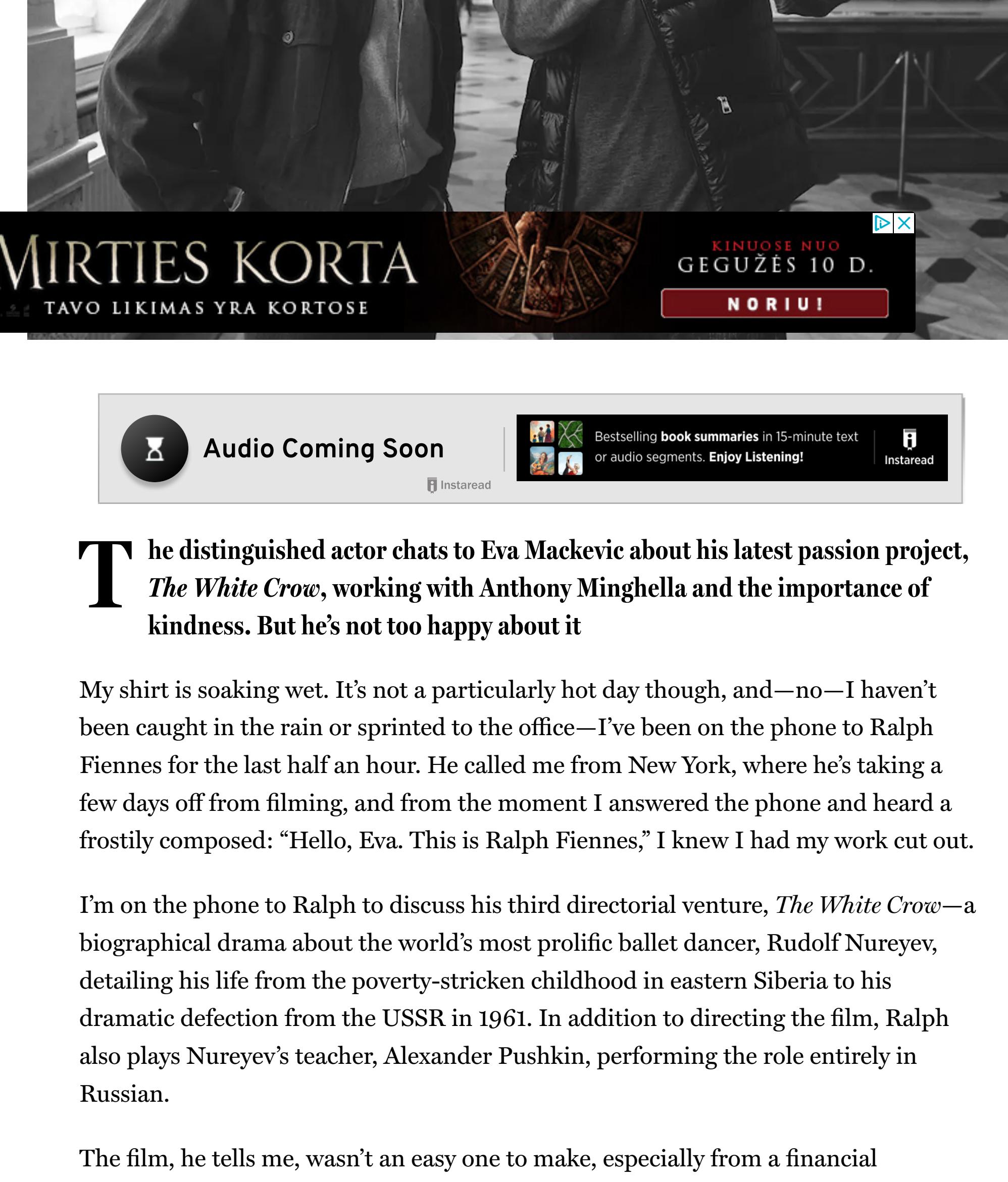


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**T**he distinguished actor chats to Eva Mackevic about his latest passion project, *The White Crow*, working with Anthony Minghella and the importance of kindness. But he's not too happy about it

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 Ivanko), 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."

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

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