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Sergei Polunin: Dancer

Sarah Elgart · Wednesday, September 14th, 2016

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To say that the study of classical ballet is demanding or difficult is a gross understatement. Dancers are athletes, and sometimes most especially in the classical genre where the demand for incredible technical precision, tremendous sacrifice and devotion, not to mention the endurance of regular pain is required and rote. They spend hours in class, rehearsals, and at home, pushing their bodies to achieve extraordinary elevation, flexibility, and technical precision. The end goal is an astonishing kind of superhuman ability, agility, and endurance, as well as a cultivated perception that dancers are somehow not subject to the same laws of gravity as mere mortal beings.

Polunin leaps

Such is part of the focus of **Dancer**, an amazingly human and moving documentary beautifully directed by Steven Cantor and produced by Gabrielle Tana about virtuosic Ukrainian ballet dancer Sergei Polunin. Born into a happy childhood in a town where everyone was poor, Polunin says there was no sense of 'better than' to compare his life to. But his parents, largely his mother, envisioned greater possibilities at hand for Sergei. In 2003, at the age of thirteen, after four years of gymnastics and several more studying classical at the Kiev State Choreographic Institute, he was accepted into the prestigious Royal Academy of Ballet in England. As a consequence, his family rallied and eventually split up in support of his ballet studies. Alone in England, where Polunin went not knowing a word of the language, his ambition and incomparable drive led, after a very short time, to his ascent to a soloist position and then to becoming the youngest principal in the RAB's history by age nineteen. However, two years into this meteoric rise, amidst accusations of drug use and a growing personal discontent with his life in dance, Polunin abruptly quit the company with the intention of quitting dance altogether.

Sergei in studio as a boy

In his mere 26 years, Sergei Polunin has been called a lot of names from *"The most gifted dancer of his generation"* to a *"Temperamental bad boy"*. He ultimately became known as much for his tattoos and off stage partying as for his on stage prowess. Three years after his abrupt and untimely departure from the Royal Ballet, with a mixture of footage both current and gathered from childhood, and no small dose of insight, the film **Dancer** deftly takes us inside of Polunin's angst, personal stories, and the struggles leading to this momentous decision. In following them we get the sense of a driven young man of extraordinary talent, sensitivity, and heart, who grows up

without family, practicing classical twice as much as anyone else in Royal Academy of Dance, but who at the end of the day felt like the creative artist in him was being slowly killed. *"I feel like they treat dancers like kids now… They don't ask questions, they don't treat them as artists. It's like little soldiers who just do the work… An artist needs to create."*

Initially envisioned only for use in the film, David La Chapelle's music video featuring Polunin for "Take Me to Church" was going to be his farewell to dance. But then La Chapelle released it on the web and it went viral in advance of **Dancer's** completion and release. And as we see in the film, the result of this affected Polunin deeply, so much so that consequently what started out as Sergei's swan song from ballet became a new beginning for him.

I have to admit that seeing the music video in the context of the film as well as meeting and speaking with Sergei and the filmmakers gave me a different kind of appreciation for it. In the film you see clips of tiny children imitating his moves, and dancing along with La Chapelle's video, and most importantly you see how deeply Polunin was moved by this, ultimately leading him to reconsider his resolve to quit dance. Perhaps this is not surprising as the film profiles how Sergei himself struggled with a sense of a childhood lost and *"the end of fun"* once his serious ballet studies began, and ultimately the fracturing of his family and divorce of his parents. I asked the film's producer Gabrielle Tana about the decision to use the music video as part of the film, and about other specifics related to **Dancer**, including Sergei's new endeavor "Project Polunin"**:**

"The film was a journey… I was hoping that David (La Chapelle) would become involved in the film from early on. He found the song (Hozier's "Take Me to Church"). It was never meant to go out on the Internet, it was just meant to be part of the film. When the video went viral (David La Chapelle released it on the web early on) it touched so many people. Sergei was inspired by that… It was a game changer. It was about creating something that was creative for Sergei. It was about getting him engaged in the creative process."

How did Director Steven Cantor get involved?

"I've known Steve for a long time. He loves dance, is passionate about it, has a daughter studying with New York City Ballet, and he made a push to get involved."

Does Sergei still want to dance and does he want to dance again with the Royal Ballet?

"Yes, *and I think that will happen."*

During the Q&A after the film, Sergei spoke about his upcoming endeavor, Project Polunin, which I asked Gabrielle Tana to describe:

"It's about a few things. It has a performance element… Initially its about creating new work and an arena for young dancers to work together – they can also work with the big companies – and its about collaborations with different artists, for example Felicia Pell is doing set design. It's about invigorating classical ballet, not with modern dance but doing new things with new artists… And then it's also designed to give representation guidance, and connection for young artists. It's about creating a new financial model for dance."

In speaking to Sergei himself after the screening, I had the sense of an exceedingly sensitive human being who wears his heart on his sleeve, someone who by his own admission *"feels naked"* when he dances on stage. I also had the sense of a dancer of unique gifts coming from a country where the confines for creativity within his profession are very strict and narrow, and of his going straight from that into the rigidity of training and schedule that were demanded of him in RAD and at The Royal Ballet. In recent interviews, Polunin has said of that time, *"I really fell into the darkness… And I did think I hit the rock bottom… You know, it's like meeting the devil."* When we spoke I asked Sergei if he had seen much of the more contemporary use of classical technique ("*A little bit but not much"*) and found myself wondering if he might ever begin to expand his repertory in this direction, and discover new avenues for creativity.

Sergei rehearses in the studio

I posited this theory to Gabrielle Tana and asked her if that was part of what the film was suggesting:
“You know… He was alone… He arrived in England not speaking the language. The Royal Ballet didn’t work any other muscle except his dance muscle. It’s a story about growing up. ***Dancer*** *is really a coming of age story about an individual with an incredible gift.”*
Dancer is not just a film for balletomanes. It’s an emotionally engaging and eminently relatable film about an artist of great promise getting lost and finding his way, about the need for and love of family, and about the power of the body and the human spirit working in tandem.
https://youtu.be/u8ZNodT9kcM

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