

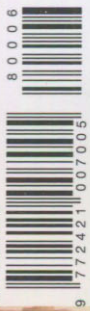
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# CAP 74024



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DESPERATELY PERFECT

«Any time I photograph ballet dancers backstage or in the wings, I'm overwhelmed with nostalgia of my years at ballet school. I believe this connection sparks some kind of magic which translates in my photographs.»

Photography Rachel Papo







**Well, how was *Desperately Perfect* born? Did you have the intention of investigating the ballet world or has it been something that came into your mind randomly?**

I have always had a special connection to ballet, because I spent most of my younger years in ballet classes in Israel. After completing my *Israeli Female Soldiers* project, a series based on my reflections on being a 18-year-old soldier in Israel, I decided to explore another experience from my childhood. I attended a rather strict ballet school for 9 years, taught by a Russian couple, and I quit when I was 14. During the last several years I had classes every single day, and at some point I just gave up.

I never had time to do anything else with my friends and I always felt frustrated that I was not one of the top dancers. I wanted to go back and investigate these emotions of hope and frustration, so I searched for a ballet school that had extremely high standards and where the ambition of the students and the competition among them would be very palpable. The Vaganova Ballet Academy was the perfect place. For these children ballet consumed their entire life and they had very little time left to engage in anything else.

**How do you feel when you look at these pictures years later?**

Looking through these photos after so many years I feel amazed of how lucky I was to have had the opportunity to create this series. The old historical building, the traditional outfits, the uncompromising expectations, the hopeful young faces, they bring back the feelings that I had. Looking at them is like stepping into a different era. Moreover, the pictures remind me of my own ambitions and the point I was at in my career.

**In which period of the year were the pictures taken?**

I photographed this series in the early summer of 2007. A wonderful time to be in St. Petersburg, because it was the period of the White Nights, when the sky remains bright all night long. It was also perfect timing to visit the school, as they were approaching the final stage of their annual auditions and the end-of-the-year performance at the Mariinsky Theatre.

**What were the reactions of the children in regards of being photographed?**

The children liked being photographed and in most cases tried to look their best for the pictures. I often felt that they were hoping to be portrayed, in order to get more chance of exposure. The dedication and endurance, yet the pain, struggle and the fear of failure of these children, was immensely touching. I tried to show them from all aspects of their daily routine, both formal class activities and playful interactions. The intention was to highlight they were still children with dreams, hobbies and unique personalities, despite their regimented, uncompromising and competitive environment.

**Are there any elements of the series that you would change?**

Not at all. If I had to do it again, I would do it exactly the same!

**Do you ever imagine going back there and looking for the same protagonists, who are probably adults now, to see if they are still dancers?**

The idea of going back and finding the dancers in my photos has been brewing in my mind for quite a while. I wonder where they are and if they continued their dancing career. I never published this series as a book and I think the idea of adding another chapter would tie the project together and ensemble a great book.

**What adjective or adjectives would you use to describe the project?**

Wistful, enchanting, hopeful, bittersweet, poetic, cinematic and of course desperate.

**How long was the duration of taking pictures? Days, weeks...**

I passed 5 weeks in St. Petersburg, of which I spent almost every day with the children.

**When they finally showcased on the stage, can you still recall your emotions? In my opinion I think you should have joined them in the spotlight, considering the experience and the time you spent together.**

The final performance was during the last couple of days of my visit in St. Petersburg. By that time, I was already familiar with many of the students and they were accustomed to seeing me with my camera. It doesn't take long for me to become attached to the subjects I photograph, especially when they are so young. So it's needless to say I was swept away by their excitement and anticipation. Any time I photograph ballet dancers backstage or in the wings, I'm overwhelmed with nostalgia of my years at ballet school.

I believe this connection sparks some kind of magic which translates in my photographs.

















