

## Black Swan

One intriguing film entry for this holiday season is “Black Swan,” a dark psychological thriller which takes place in the cutthroat world of—ballet!

It stars a young ballerina, Nina, played by Natalie Portman, who is vying for the lead in a new production of “Swan Lake” (the music of which, by the way, suffuses the entire picture). Her company, though never named, appears to be the New York City Ballet (based at Lincoln Center), run by a dashing and mercurial artistic director Thomas Leroy (played by French star Vince Cassell). Nina is utterly dedicated to her art, having been brought up to star in ballet by her demanding mother Erica (Barbara Hershey), who left a dance career for her child’s sake and now lives through her.

Nina has the looks and frame of a dancer but also harbors the anxieties and dreads of one who feels she must succeed. When the company’s reigning diva, Beth McIntyre (Winona Ryder) is forced to retire, Leroy looks to find a new star to play both the white and black swan of Tchaikovsky’s work, a woman who can be, by turns, both virginal and earthy, innocent and seductive. Threatening Nina’s dream is Lily (Mila Kunis), a sultry beauty who has all the elements of a black swan and seems to be winning over Leroy. The question becomes how much the sheltered, pampered Nina can attain the characteristics of a true black swan and sway Leroy to her side.

While the “Black Swan” offers an outpouring of acting (and plenty of agonizing, too) from Portman, the whole film does not fully convince. The story intermingles, not always successfully, harrowing, dreamlike sequences that are supposedly flowing from Nina’s fevered brain, but some of these leave the viewer puzzled—you simply can’t tell what is real or not. Further, the film, which also aims to depict the hard, physical world of ballet, slops too easily into garish melodrama, to the point that it hurts to see young Portman’s face contorted one more time as she tries to achieve the “perfect” swan.

Older ballet—and movie—fans will, of course, remember Michael Powell’s classic “The Red Shoes” (1948), a film of both flesh and fantasy that turned on legions to this dance form decades ago. The writer/director, Darren Aronofsky, seems to be aiming in part to achieve the effect of the earlier film, but “Black Swan’s” stark reality—the pain and anguish it shows are much more realistic—tends to defeat its fantasy element.

Aronofsky himself sees parallels between “Black Swan” and his last film, “The Wrestler” (2008, which resurrected the career of Mickey Rourke). He has said that in both these films he features performers, entertainers, who “use their bodies as their instrument and then go through a lot of pain to create what they consider beautiful.” For me, one true test for this film was how well it showed genuine balletic movement by the leads, themselves not professional dancers, and make it look convincing (as a bemusled Rourke made real his grappling).

The verdict is: nice try, but no real payoff. The burden here is really on Portman, who must appear in every kind of ballet action, including final performance. While she certainly looks the part and can handle arm movement well, especially when being partnered, she (and the director) simply cannot pull off the execution of real ballet moves. When she is in the full throes of the swan, black or white, the camera cannot

show her full figure: she is invariably shot waist-up or torso-up. We never really see Nina (except at a distance with a double) doing the serious work of a dancer in full figure. This may seem a petty gripe for a project which has tried hard to give us ballet in both its raw and refined dimensions, but it is precisely Aronofsky's pretended seriousness which demands more.

*("Black Swan" is rated R and runs 103 minutes.)*

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