



For the last of our look at this year's films nominated for Best Picture, we turn our attention to "Black Swan". In a year where many of the films nominated are dark and intense, this one is the darkest and the most intense. I never really considered ballet a contact sport, but in Darren Aronofsky's fascinating character study, it is as physically and mentally taxing as professional football.

Natalie Portman shines as Nina Sayers, a long time member of a prestigious New York ballet company. For years, she has been just on the cusp of breaking through to stardom, but she is the type of dancer who is so focused on her technique that she lacks passion. She is mechanically flawless but a bit robotic on the stage.

Fate steps in, however, as the prima ballerina of the company (played by Winona Ryder) has suffered the worst fate in her field; she has grown too old. So a new season is upon the company, and director Thomas Leroy (Vincent Cassel) has to move on. He has chosen to open the season with the old chestnut "Swan Lake", but as you might expect in a movie like this, Thomas is a "visionary", and he wants his version to be different; more intense.

To the shock of the entire company, he chooses Nina as the lead role as the Swan Queen, but he begins to immediately challenge her. She has the perfect technique to dance the part of the White Swan; all frills and prettiness. But the role also requires her to assume the persona of the Black Swan, and dance with a passion and recklessness that she has never been able to summon before due to her being such a perfectionist.

Nina lives a completely sheltered life, sharing a small New York apartment with her mother (Barbara Hershey), a failed ballerina who now lives her entire life through the career of Nina. Nina is still treated like a little girl, with stuffed animals filling her room and her mother counting every calorie for her and chiding her if she doesn't know her whereabouts at all time.

As Nina's life starts getting turned around by the pressure of this first lead role, it is further complicated by the presence of a new member of the ballet company, Lily, played by Mila Kunis. Lily is the polar opposite of Nina; carefree, uninhibited, and afraid of nothing. She strikes up a friendship with Nina, but is it really that, or is she trying to sabotage Nina and take the role for herself?

That is the continued question of the movie; what is real and what are the delusions of the fragile Nina? She is slowly cracking up, and while some of her hallucinations are obvious, other times you are just as confused as Nina regarding what is real and what is not.

Natalie Portman has won most of the best actress awards this season for this portrayal, and is favored to win Best Actress on Sunday. The awards have been deserved, as Portman is amazing in this part. She underwent a year of ballet training to be able to pull this off, as well as the weight loss needed to make her character believable. But the physical aspect of it is not nearly as important as her ability to show Nina's wildly swinging emotional state. She fears she is getting too old, but is still basically an emotional child...maybe even still a virgin, as she tries to confront her possible lust for both Thomas and for Lily.

Similar to Aronofsky's stark "Requiem for a Dream", we spend the entire movie watching what may be a woman's complete collapse into madness. Or are we? Unlike "Requiem", where we know the drug addictions will eventually destroy the characters, we still hold out hope that Nina will finally pull it all together and shine in her performance. Portman's brilliance in this role is to be able to keep you guessing, as well as maintaining her sympathy as a character.

Mila Kunis also astounds in the role of Lily, but part of the credit must go to the writing as well. It would be so easy to make Lily the antagonist of the movie; but as with Nina, you are kept guessing. You LIKE Lily, and want her to be the friend (and maybe something more) that Nina so desperately needs, but you just don't quite trust her.

It is the same with Vincent Cassel as Thomas. He is often the stereotypical arrogant artistic type that you expect to see in this kind of movie, taking his cues from Roy Scheider's Joe Gideon in "All That Jazz", berating the dancers, throwing tantrums, and attempting to sleep with as many of the women as he can. But something is different with his relationship towards Nina, and while he might be wanting to seduce her, he often does appear to be very concerned for her, and wants her to be able to break through.

Two other smaller roles are also worth noting. Winona Ryder is very good in the smaller role of Beth McIntyre, the "old" woman cast aside by the ballet world. While you may wonder if Nina is going crazy or not, there is no doubt that Beth has totally lost it.

Barbara Hershey, as Nina's mom Erica, has lost it in an entirely different way. When you first see her, she seems to be a very loving and devoted mother. It doesn't take long, however, before you see that there is a difference between devotion and obsession, and Erica is definitely on the wrong side of that balancing act. Hershey should have been considered for Best Supporting Actress for this performance of one of the worst stage mothers I've ever seen.

All in all, Director Aronofsky has put together what I think is his best work yet. I've always found his work interesting, but flawed...a little too much style over substance in "Requiem", "Pi", and "The Wrestler", and I thought he made one of the most boring movies ever with "The Fountain". But he's finally found a perfect combination of style and substance with this very disturbing movie. It's a bit difficult to watch at times (a bit on the gory side on occasion), but it tells a wonderful tale, and does it in a very unique style.

**My Rating: Brian Sipe (3 ½ footballs)**