

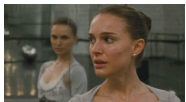
## En Pointe, on Edge: "Black Swan" and "The Fighter"

Written by Mike Schulz

Sunday, 19 December 2010 18:02

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### **BLACK SWAN**

In director Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan*, the first words we hear are uttered by professional ballet dancer Nina Sayers (Natalie Portman), who tells her mother, "I had the craziest dream last night." And for the next 105 minutes, the movie unfurls like a crazy dream itself – a crazy, fascinating, terrifying, exhilarating dream that you have no desire to wake from. You can label the film a psychological drama, or a hallucinogenic thriller, or an art-house horror flick, and each would be appropriate. But none of those tags really hints at how much delectable *fun Black Swan*

is. As with a dream that you want to return to the moment you wake up, you want to experience the intoxicating, rapturous weirdness of Aronofsky's vision all over again the minute the end credits start to roll.

For all of the movie's *outré* strangeness, though, its premise is remarkably simple. A technical virtuoso lacking inner fire, Portman's Nina is awarded the coveted lead of the Swan Queen in her company's production of *Swan Lake*. Yet as her director (a confident, complex Vincent Cassel) urges his star to lose her inhibitions, and company upstart Lily (Mila Kunis) insinuates herself in Nina's periphery, the dancer's struggle for perfection leads to her slowly losing her mind – hearing imaginary (are are they?) conversations, peeling away at imaginary (or are they?) wounds, and seeing vaguely threatening *doppelgängers*

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of herself everywhere she looks.

Given its leading character's grueling, what-I-did-for-art self-flagellation and the grim bloodiness of the physical torment – the superior sound design ensures that you *feel* every crack and crunch of Nina's bones and toenails –

*Black Swan*

could easily have been unendurable. But making audiences suffer is not on Aronofsky's agenda here; the movie is

*playfully*

nihilistic. Though the mood is anything but light, there's a wonderful friskiness in the melodramatic excess of Clint Mansell's score, and Matthew Libatique's swirling and swooping cinematography, and Barbara Hershey's feral turn as Nina's tightly wound stage mother. And though she doesn't offer

*comic*

relief, exactly, Kunis' every appearance is a relief nonetheless, her leer and husky murmur hinting at worlds of forbidden, unimaginable delights ... or equally unimaginable malevolence. (Cassel's director praises Lily's dancing as "effortless," and that also effectively describes Kunis' sharp, vibrant portrayal.)

With Portman – or, sometimes, *dual* Portmans – visible in nearly every frame, though, *Black Swan* is

hers to carry, and it's a task she pulls off with depth, fierce passion, and, in no small accomplishment, a series of rather astonishing ballet moves. To be sure, she's given assistance by the finely tuned precision of the editing and Aronofsky's spectacularly imaginative, oftentimes breathtakingly creepy staging. (He's especially fine whenever Nina's mirrored reflection moves just a

*li-i-ittle*

slower than Nina herself.) But Portman's performance is a masterful actor's achievement, and you don't have to look hard to see the

*joy*

emanating from her harrowing portrayal; in a true role of a (young) lifetime, Portman appears alive on-screen in a way she never has before. I winced on numerous occasions and audibly gasped twice, but at no point during

*Black Swan*

did I want to be anywhere but in that auditorium; the movie is a deliriously wicked good time.

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~~Shallow Brooks~~ [Shallow Brooks](#)