

Black Swan (2010)

Rated R. Our ratings: V- 3; L-3 ; S/N- 8. Running time: 1 hour 48 min.

Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one.

So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

1 Cor. 9:24-27

Director Darren Aronofsky's Nina practices endlessly with ballet film will remind arther fwellow ballet dancers as house fans of The Red Shoes, butthey strive for perfection.

I suspect that general audiences will be thinking of the director's own The Wrestler. 2010 Fox Searchlight Films

Although the world of sweaty professional wrestling is far removed from that of black tie ballet, the two are alike in that they require total discipline, up to and sometimes including, a willingness to endure masochistic pain. Not a subtle filmmaker, Aronsky provides several close-up scenes of ballet corps member Nina Sayers (Natalie Portman) examining her bloody toes and fingers and the painful scratches and bruises on her

back. The long, exhausting rehearsals, often just repeating endlessly the basic steps, until those in charge are completely satisfied—all this and more portray the dancers as, to paraphrase the apostle Paul, punishing and enslaving their bodies as they strive for perfection.

Nina, living with her former ballerina mother Erica (Barbara Hershey) in a small, cluttered apartment, longs to dance the lead in Tchaikovsky's "Swan Lake" ballet. We see this in the prologue of the film in which she dances superbly with her black-costumed partner, who, through digital effects changes into the black swan with large, fluttering wings. This sequence turns out to be a dream. When she awakens, we soon see that her future is yet to be determined.

The Svengali-like artistic director Thomas Leroy (Vincent Cassel) grandly announces that he will stage the Tchaikovsky ballet as it has never been done before, and that he is passing over his aging prima ballerina Beth MacIntyre (Winona Ryder) for a fresh face. Nina is but one of several in the corps who dream of leaping into the spotlight as the company's soloist. In private he tells Nina that she is capable of playing the White Swan, but lacks the passion to portray the dark side of the character, the Black Swan. "Perfection," he tells her, isn't just about control. It is also about letting go." He tries to force himself upon her, but she resists so passionately that she bites his lip.

Thus Nina, thinking that her act has cost her the promotion, is surprised later when Thomas announces that he has chosen his new prima donna—it will be Nina. Apparently her passionate resistance to his advances convinced him that she has what it takes.

However, as the rehearsals proceed, Thomas continually criticizes her restrained dancing as the Black Swan. There are other problems for Nina as well. Former star Beth MacIntyre is furious at being cast aside, and Nina had sneaked into her dressing room and stolen some makeup and earrings. New dancer Lily (Mila Kunis) from San Francisco joins the company, and it becomes evident that she does have the passion required to portray convincingly the Black Swan, and soon we are thinking of the engaging young star in All About Eve who schemed to supplant the aging star. Someone writes in red lipstick "WHORE" on Nina's mirror, and this is followed by a scene on the darkened stage that, combined with eerie music, injects suspense—co-screenwriter Mark Heyman has spoken of the film as a "ballet thriller." Then there are the many times when Nina or her mother worry about the bleeding scratches on her back, her bleeding toes and fingernails, and we wonder if we are also seeing one of those TV "disease of the week" films. Will Nina reach the pinnacle of success only to succumb to some terrible ailment?

At times it is difficult to discern whether we are watching reality or one of the fantasies of Nina. Driven by the criticisms and taunts of Thomas, Nina begins to let go her inhibitions, first through masturbation, and then in a drug-addled love scene with Lily. Nina's mother Erica tries to keep the two apart, no doubt seeing in the younger woman a rival for her daughter's affections. Barbara Hershey throws her self into her portrayal of a smothering mother who lives only through her sole offspring. We suspect that she, intent on creating a carbon of herself, would have a trying time if Nina becomes a star, and thus begin the process of breaking away from her domination.

Filling the film with melodrama and suspense, and Tchaikovsky's soaring music, Aronsky often goes over the top, but is never boring. He has a surprise or two for us as well in the plot. Nina's descent into madness: we wonder—is it

permanent or temporary, the last words we here her speak leaving us wondering. Is our young, fragile heroine another of those who have lost their souls in giving themselves over totally to their goal? As beautiful as it is, is the world of ballet large enough for a person? Is ballet worth the sacrifices of relationships that it demands? In Erin Brokovich the heroine gives up her relationship with her lover by refusing to quit her job at the law office, but her goal was to help a large number of victims of oppression, not to enrich herself. This is a fascinating film to see and discuss—but two scenes—of intense masturbation and a lesbian coupling between the two dancers—will make this a risky choice to use with some church groups.

For Reflection/Discussion

1. What did you feel about the relationship of Nina and her mother? Make you feel uncomfortable at times?
2. What were you expecting from the frequent showing of the scratches on her back and her bleeding fingers? Were there clues that she was losing her sense of reality?
3. How does the film compare with *The Red Shoes*? What do you think of the picture of the ballet world that the films offer? What other fields of endeavor demand such single-minded devotion and require such submission to physical pain (and psychic) pain?
4. What do you think of artistic director Thomas Leroy? How is he like the athletic coach who must regard members of his team as tools rather than as human beings? In what other ways does he use the dancers beyond just what they contribute to the dance?
5. What do you think of Erica? How does her ambition drive her to do things that Nina would not think of doing? How did you

feel when she came to Nina's apartment and invited her out? Does she change in the course of the film?

6. Another film to compare to this one, Mao's Last Dancer—how are the two main characters similar in their drive for perfection in ballet?

7. What do you think of the climax, and of her words about being perfect? Do you think she has paid too high a price? What do you think will happen to her later on?