

The Many Faces of ‘Black Swan,’ Deconstructed

By Alastair Macaulay

- Feb. 9, 2011

-
-
-
-
-

Few ballet films excite popular fascination, and almost none to the degree of [“Black Swan.”](#) This month, it’s up for five Oscars. So why has it so intrigued academy voters and the public alike? Surely because it exerts its lurid appeal on multiple levels.

It’s a backstager: Will poor hard-working Nina (Natalie Portman) get the white-black double lead role of “Swan Lake,” pull off its taxing demands, survive till the first night and vanquish her rival, not to mention her terrors? It’s horror: Nina’s life spirals out of control for alarming reasons apparently beyond her control and indeed her comprehension. It’s psychosexual drama: Those forces come from her confused perceptions of her mother, her sexual inhibitions, her ambitions and her increasingly schizoid fantasies. It’s a Tchaikovsky-soundtrack movie: Nothing about it is neater than the way Clint Mansell’s score is almost all taken from “Swan Lake” material, with a marvelous use of the slow chords prefacing the ballet’s most famous pas de deux for an offstage effect of psychological suspense.

Most powerfully it’s a modern example of that old genre, the woman’s movie. Nina’s loves are seen as repressed and illicit, her successes are shown as triumphs in an unnatural and injurious art form, and she is duly punished for these transgressions. Joan Crawford would have killed to play her.

Nina has a female nemesis, but that turns out to be less her sexy, confident frenemy Lily (Mila Kunis) than her own alter ego. Yes, “Black Swan” is the latest example of what the film critic Jeanine Basinger has called the “My god, there’s two of her!” device. Nina develops her own built-in anti-Nina.

And it’s a highly partial airless view of ballet’s interior workings. It goes out of its way to contradict the old escapist idea that “everything’s beautiful at the ballet.” Instead it takes energy from the aspects of ballet that are cruel and unfair. Let’s not pretend, however, that those aspects don’t exist.

Let's also admit there have always been striking parallels between the ballet classics of the 19th century and the Hollywood women's movies of the mid-20th century. In "A Stolen Life" (1946) passive, sensitive and artistically creative Bette Davis, thanks to her inhibitions, loses Glenn Ford to her active, sexy but heartless twin played, of course, by Bette Davis. In "Random Harvest" (1942) amnesiac Ronald Colman realizes only at the end that his perfect but cool, unyielding wife, Greer Garson, is also the warm, outgoing and devoted woman whom he married in the love-filled other life long buried in his subconscious. Resemblances between these absurd but deeply enjoyable movies and the full-length "Swan Lake" are easy to spot.

Likewise "Black Swan's" alter-ego rivalries and divided-ego visions connect intimately to the good-bad, white-black, active-passive Odette-Odile heroines of "Swan Lake." First Nina is told she doesn't have it in her to be both the white swan and the black. Eventually, however, it's disconcerting how much of the contrasting heroines she does contain.

Nina sometimes sees her anti-Nina in the mirror. Ballet has been obsessed with mirrors for centuries, and not just in works like August Bournonville's "Ventana" (1856) and Jerome Robbins's "Afternoon of a Faun" (1953). Dancers often spend more of their time in front of the mirror than before an audience, and it's in the mirror that they see both the ideal versions of themselves they hope to show the public as well as their own failings.

In "Black Swan" Nina's mirror-image starts to take on an independent life. Away from the classroom Nina continually sees this doppelgänger acting out her hopes and horrors. At the climax of a lesbian fantasy Nina's lover Lily turns into Nina's lover Nina: a radical rewrite of the old idea of the dancer as Narcissus.

If Nina is a narcissist, however, she is appalled by it. More obviously she is a self-tormentor. I wish this view of ballet were a lie, but it's not. It is, though, far from being the whole truth. The "Black Swan" screenplay has surely been prompted by a number of dancers' memoirs Gelsey Kirkland's 1986 best seller, "Dancing on My Grave," is just the most famous to convey its neurotic version of the internal life of ballet.

Nina could learn from a dancer she invokes in a dressing-room scene: Margot Fonteyn. In her 1975 "Autobiography" that most reasonable of superstar ballerinas emphasized the crucial distinction between taking work seriously ("imperative") and taking oneself seriously ("disastrous"). Yet "Black Swan" could have been inspired by elements of Fonteyn's own story: She wrote emphatically of the "terror" with which she faced every performance of "Swan Lake" (whose central role she danced for some 35 years), and how, after Frederick Ashton told her everything that was missing at the dress rehearsal for his new ballet "Apparitions," she found "by some alchemy of despair" the artistry to rise to the work's demands.

One book about Fonteyn quotes her as saying, "I'm sure if everyone knew how physically cruel dancing really is, nobody would watch only those people who enjoy bullfights!" For some dancers it is the hips that take most strain; some, the spine; for Fonteyn and others it was the feet. "Black Swan" offers just enough imagery to show us why pointwork in ballet can seem as extreme and punitive as the old Chinese custom of binding women's feet.

Though "Black Swan" certainly feels hostile to ballet, I don't think it means to be. Its real objective above and beyond that of so many women's movies is to imply that a woman's truest fulfillment is as (heterosexual) lover, wife and mother, and therefore that Nina's best artistic successes can never compensate for her personal sacrifices. The "Black Swan" view of ballet is that it's an unnatural art in which women deny too many normal aspects of womanhood. There is copious evidence to support that view. Witness such dancer

autobiographies as Ms. Kirkland's and Toni Bentley's "Winter Season" (1982). Ms. Bentley describes how, when she has her third monthly period in a row, colleagues in her dressing room ask, "Are you sure you're a dancer?" True dancers, according to that attitude, don't have normal female functions.

To these negatives ballet brings many positives: energy, responsiveness to music, discipline, teamwork, idealism, interpretative fulfillment. Not so "Black Swan." It's both irresistible and odious. I was gripped by its melodrama, but its nightmarish view of both ballet and women is not one I'm keen to see again. As a horror movie, it's not extreme. As a woman's movie, however, it's the end of the line.

Most depressingly, Nina is just not a great role. She's too much a victim the film makes her helpless, passive to be seriously involving. Though she enjoys triumph, we never see the willpower that gets her there, just the psychosis and the martyrdom. It's the latest hit movie for misogynists.

["The Red Shoes"](#) (1948) to which "Black Swan" owes so much actually had more psychological depth. Its ballerina heroine found both fame and love, and her torment came from choosing between them. That's a highly ambiguous attitude toward ballet she cannot permanently reconcile dance and love but you can see why it inspired thousands of girls to take up the art. The "Black Swan" idea of ballet is narrower: obsession, torment, inadequacy, paranoia, delusion.

Those things aren't absent from ballet (or womanhood or life). And so Nina's interior and exterior lives here spin together into a compelling vortex.

Will "Black Swan" follow "The Red Shoes" in inspiring a new generation of young dancers? Unlikely. It will, however, draw many to "Swan Lake," to check out the ballet at the heart of the movie. What will they see?

Surely it's time to go back to staging "Swan Lake" as it used to be before the 1940s, with no black swan at all, but with the antiheroine Odile dressed in strong colors, as a woman of the world. Her seductions lie in seeming not demonic but glamorously if deceptively available, unlike the withheld Odette. No ballet of the 19th century goes further into true tragedy: Odette the Swan Queen takes heroic responsibility for herself and also her flock of swan-maidens.

Alas, companies go on presenting "Swan Lake" as a crude choice between a good, loyally loving but passive victim and an evil, active and vampishly duplicitous sorceress. And ballet goes on abounding in sexist, melodramatic clichés. While this remains so, "Black Swan" is the ballet movie our era deserves.