

Black Swan: or how I learned to stop worrying and love the ballet

It's no secret that Darren Aronofsky is one of the bravest directors currently working. Each film has been more daring than the last and his latest "Black Swan," on DVD and Bluray tomorrow, is perhaps the most daring yet. Daring not because of extreme subject matter, but because he's never attempted to create a formula. Each film is completely different from one another and almost unrecognizable as an Aronofsky film. Black Swan follows "The Wrestler," the brutal, heart wrenching miniature masterpiece starring Mickey Rourke and if you were to look at the films side by side the only thing they'd have in common would be quality. Black Swan shadows the flustered and confined life of an overly emotional ballet dancer, Natalie Portman, who is approaching her expiration date as a ballerina. Casting for a new rendition of "Swan Lake" is currently underway within her company and she's up for the lead. The only problem is, the grittiness required to play the black swan is absent from her repertoire. Her highly sexual male instructor, played to perfection by Vincent Cassel, tries to evoke this harshness from her, pushing both her mind and body to their very limits. Meanwhile, a new, attractive, highly skilled ballerina joins the company, played by Mila Kunis. Mila's character does not have to work vigorously to stay atop her dancing ability, but is blessed with a raw talent. She quickly becomes the main character's understudy and rival. Mila Kunis deserves some attention, for she walks the tightrope of being the film's antagonist, while also remaining completely loveable. Black Swan is a very dark film as a whole, but Mila shines a light, making her performance all the more intriguing and even menacing in a Harry Powell sort of way. All the performances are spot on and really carry the film to a breathtaking climax.

This is not to say the film is without flaws. The overall story is a bit unoriginal masked by a refreshing context. The concept of schizophrenia is dealt with in the film, which is a common twist used in movies, exploring the idea that hero and villain are two parts of the same character; though thought-provoking and deep, ultimately overused. A system to explore this theme, however, is one of the film's most redeeming values. Visible in almost every single shot of the film is a mirror. This is a subtle hint that the character is involved in a struggle first and foremost with herself. This usage of mirrors can only be described as divine. The element of sexuality in the film is phenomenal, again exemplifying the struggle with herself, showing how unfamiliar she is with her own body, how out-of-touch she is, which is her biggest obstacle in portraying the role of the black swan with the kind of sensuality and passion it demands. The cinematography is jaw-dropping; despite the usage of shaky camera work which is often distracting (another example of this is Aronofsky's early effort "Pi," where ten minutes of the film is literally indistinguishable). Some of the extraordinary camerawork can be found in a scene featuring a nightclub, which is one of the most visually affective sequences. Simply put, this film succeeds as much as it does because of Darren Aronofsky as director. A lesser filmmaker would have made it a subpar, over-sexualized, melodramatic romp. It takes true skill to reinvent a cliché and remind the viewer that clichés only exist because they happen so often in the real world.