



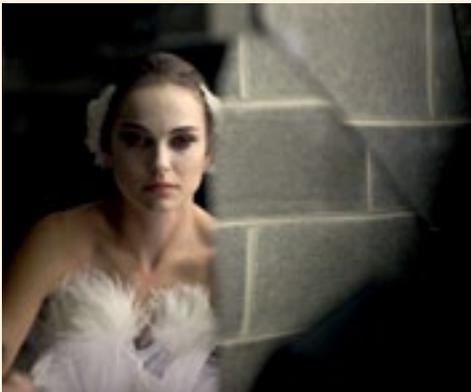
Phantasmagoric... a poster for *Black Swan*, courtesy 20th Century Fox

WHEN SWANS GO BAD

Black Swan is tipped for Oscar glory. *Dance Gazette* explores its delirious appeal, and choreographer Benjamin Millepied tells **David Leventhal** how he helped Natalie Portman dance



What does it take to be perfect?...
Natalie Portman in *Black Swan*
Photos © 20th Century Fox



Oscar-buzz already surrounds *Black Swan*, Darren Aronofsky's audacious new film set in the ballet world. Natalie Portman, who plays the terrified heroine, is heavily tipped for statuette duty. More importantly, it's a phantasmagoric, exquisitely discomfiting story about the desperate desire to prove yourself.

Nina (Natalie Portman) is a ballerina of immaculate technique in a prestigious New York company. She gets her big break when she is cast as Odette-Odile in *Swan Lake*. Nina inhabits the white swan's crystalline untouchability, but struggles to locate her inner black swan. A lifetime of rigorously schooled good behaviour means that bad-girl Odile lies buried way beneath the skin.

'There are remarkably few horror movies about the terror and violence of making art,' mused Terrence Rafferty recently in the *New York Times*. What does it take to be brilliant,

asks *Black Swan*? Must you lose your mind along with your inhibitions? Aronofsky is a bold filmmaker, whose dazzling visual style captures extreme mental and emotional states. *Pi*, his jittery 1998 debut, explored mathematical genius; *Requiem for a Dream* (2000) was a smacked-out story of addiction. He had popular success with *The Wrestler* (2008), with Mickey Rourke as a washed-up athlete.

Aronofsky approaches ballet without reverence. When he first heard the story of *Swan Lake*, whose spellbound heroine becomes a swan by night, he thought "'Oh, a wereswan.'" And I realised I was making a werewolf movie.' He recruited rising international choreographer Benjamin Millepied (who also appears in the film), to put his fantasies on their feet. Millepied admits that, when he first saw Portman in class, he thought: 'How am I going to turn this person into a ballerina in three months?' But the actress had studied ballet as a child, and threw herself into the remorseless training.

Black Swan is no documentary. You may recognise familiar figures from previous backstage and ballet movies. There's the rapacious artistic director (Vincent Cassel) who uses the snog as a management technique, and needles Nina ('You could be brilliant – but you're a coward'). Familiar too are the pushy mother (Barbara Hershey), sniping rivals and discarded older dancer (a mascara-smearing Winona Ryder). But Aronofsky takes the lurid clichés, ramps them up, and then makes Nina internalise them. It's devastating.

The camera swoops close to Nina, the microphone catching her shallow, nervous breath. Tucked tight into her soft pink coat and feathery scarf, Portman offers a continually anxious presence, all fragile voice and barely contained panic. She creeps into a senior ballerina's dressing room and pockets a lipstick, like a little girl rooting in her mother's vanity case in search of adulthood. She moves in peril, tremulous with wanting.

As in the best horror films, anxieties work through the body. The film is intimate with self-hatred. Nina can't flirt, can't laugh, can't pal around. Instead, she scratches at tiny cuts, the self-harmer's minute assertion of control. Pleasure is indistinguishably entwined with anxiety. Things are very different for slutty Lily (Mila Kunis), her rival, understudy and trash-talking doppelgänger. Lily has florid tattoos and a raucous, knowing guffaw; her greedy eyes sparkle with the prospect of a good time.

Don't expect to see much daylight in this film. Nina occupies a cloistered world, going between home and studio. The ballet company is a place of relentless work, and its demands are daunting – we hear the morning crack of stiff joints, see cracked nails and bleeding toes. At home, Nina's bedroom is a smothering pink-on-pink fantasia. Her mother feeds her pillowy slices of sponge cake (Nina sucking frosting from mommy's fingers is a memorably icky image). Soft toys, plush and pink as candyfloss, crowd round her bed. It's scarifying, being stuck in Nina's tormented head. By the time the delirious denouement arrives, we're craving release.

In *The Red Shoes*, aspiring ballerina Vicky Frost is asked why she wants to dance, and famously replies, 'Why do you want to live?' Aronofsky's detractors will hate the fact that he ignores that answer. 'Why do you want to die?' might be his ballerina's question. Because how else can you be perfect? **David Jays**

KNIGHT IN SHINING ARMOUR
David Leventhal
 interviews choreographer
 Benjamin Millepied

When and if it hits, success can strike quickly in the cloistered world of ballet choreographers. While some toil away anonymously in the sweaty basements of European opera houses, others possess the talent, luck and enviable connections that bring them high-profile work. The ballet gods at this moment seem to be handing Benjamin Millepied the holy grail of choreographers: a schedule that's booked for the next three years with commissions from the world's leading ballet companies. This autumn alone, his work was presented by New York City Ballet (*Plainspoken*),

Paris Opéra Ballet (*Triade*) and Het Nationale Ballet in the Netherlands (*One thing leads to another*). Millepied, 33, also maintains a regular performing schedule as a principal with the New York City Ballet, a position to which he rose a mere six years after graduating from the School of American Ballet.

Success in dance seemed inevitable for Millepied, whose mother was a modern dancer and his first teacher in Bordeaux. He studied in Lyon before moving to New York as a teenager to continue his training at SAB. Before he'd graduated, he was selected for a principal role in Jerome Robbins' *2 & 3 Part Inventions* – the same year he won the Prix de Lausanne.

Working amidst the riches of NYCB's platinum repertoire has

clearly given Millepied a first-rate choreographic education. In an art form that regularly eats choreographers for dinner, Millepied has appeared as a knight in shining armour – a smart and versatile dancer and dancemaker with an impeccable pedigree and looks to match. (*Details* magazine recently wondered out loud if he were the Baryshnikov for our era). The French Minister of Culture agreed, appointing him a Chevalier in the Order of Arts this year, just before he completed his 23rd ballet. It seems only *apropos* that Millepied would be hired to choreograph and appear alongside Natalie Portman in Darren Aronofsky's psychosexual thriller *Black Swan*.

Peripatetic and ambitious, Millepied is a hard man to pin down for an interview. When we finally connected, he was driving in a tunnel under the Hudson River, and his GPS was blaring in the background. For a man so clearly on the right path, it was somehow reassuring to know he still needs a little help getting where he's going.

David Leventhal: I read that Darren Aronofsky felt that doors were closed to him in the ballet world, that people were not immediately interested in working on this project.

Benjamin Millepied: I don't think that's exactly accurate. We were making the film at *Nutcracker* time, and Darren was looking for dancers: but it was really difficult because the dancers we were looking for were some of the best, and the companies just weren't available. It was pretty much that simple. He was able to talk to a lot of professionals. Maybe they weren't as keen, but look at the script! People might have been a little worried to be associated with the film.

What made you want to work on it?

It was really watching Darren's best work: *Requiem for a Dream* had a big impact on me as a young adult. It was hearing him talk about the film, and the fact that from the start I felt that he had a real ear for the music and the way he wanted to use it – for me it was an interesting opportunity.

As a choreographer, I assume you're usually given pretty free reign?

Yeah, but when you're making ballets there are things that in the end just don't fit, and you just throw them away. You always have to be in service to the entirety of the work you are making. My job was to be in service to the needs of the film. It wasn't about me making a really great dance. I had to suit the actors, and serve the storyline. It's interesting to work that way.

So it sounds like some of those constraints are actually inspiring for you.

It's nice to be given constraints sometimes. I was ok with that.

I wanted you to talk about what it was like working with people who are primarily actors – even actors who did a lot of intense preparation for *Black Swan's* dancing demands.

Natalie was very serious about it, and she took the training very seriously. She understood what it meant to look like a dancer and she worked very hard. For my part, it was about giving her the right basics. It's very important that the dancer understands the basics of ballet and coordination and arms, so I really worked on the upper body a lot and I told people who were teaching her class as well. I supervised certain aspects of the training. In the end she was very, very good.



'I'm definitely interested in the camera...' choreographer Benjamin Millepied Photo: Alessandra Benedetti/Corbis

My guess is that she has a very high level of emotional intelligence but couldn't help with steps in the way that dancers might.

Well come on, being a professional ballet dancer in a performing ballet company is a very difficult thing to achieve. It's years and years of work. But she had rhythm, she had a good movement quality, there was a lot there that I could use. I worked on the articulation of her arms a lot and I worked a lot on using the elbows and wrists and fingers correctly.

Which is so important in *Swan Lake*.

Yes, the articulation of the arms is key; but more than that, you have to have a sense of how a swan looks. In ballet, it takes constant reminders – using fingers and elbows and making sure the head will look up when it's supposed to. She did really well.

Were you able to work more specifically on close-up facial expression than you would on stage?

I tried to come up with more upper body ideas, you know, that would look interesting close to the camera. But I wasn't directing Natalie. That was Darren's job.

There were a lot of handheld cameras used in the dance scenes. Could you control what the dance looked like?

I could make sure the angles were good, but I think it helped a lot because not having the static camera allowed us to see more. Having the camera move actually helped the movement in general – the camera is almost another dancer, a moving view.

You worked very intimately in the creation of the film. What was it like to see the final cut?

I was so involved, it was strange for me to gather a real opinion about the film because I was so close to it. It's hard to watch myself on screen. I'm pleased with a lot of the dancing – not all of it, but some of it.

The film has a rather fantastical, almost horrific, vision of the ballet world. There's a sense that it is so cloistered and intense that it changes your psychological makeup. Was that something that you had experienced yourself?

No.

Not at all?

No.

So this was Darren's very intense vision?

I was impressed that Darren could make it work in the way that he did. It's really remarkable that he had that vision and was able to pull this off. It's also that the acting is so wonderful.

Natalie Portman has said that it was a 'very serious set, not a funny, silly set at all. It was scary, disciplined, rigorous.'

It was. There was not a lot of time. There was not a lot of money. We were upstate at Purchase [College, outside New York City], it was winter. We weren't really organised to warm up properly. And she has nothing but very serious acting to do in it... a lot of very serious emotions, so it was definitely a very focused time for everyone. There was not a lot of joking around – mostly we just had to get stuff done.



'The camera is another dancer'... Darren Aronofsky shoots the climax of *Black Swan* Photo © 20th Century Fox

Is that different from how you normally work in a studio?

No, the only problem there is that you just sit around a lot each take. There's a lot of waiting around – it's more tedious. In dance, you come, you do your work, you leave.

How much did you go back to other sources?

A lot, a lot. I watched Natasha Makarova, and the Royal Ballet's Anthony Dowell. I watched the old St. Petersburg, Mariinsky Kirov – the first Kirov *Swan Lake* [on video], which was beautiful to watch. And Georgina Parkinson.

Is Petipa's original choreography in there?

There's definitely some. But I redid most of it, keeping a lot of it very simple, because I had to.

Do you see yourself working more in film?

Yes, I just directed a short film, in Paris. I'm definitely interested in the camera. And I've got another project coming up.

Is it something that you can talk about?

Um, no, I don't want to, it's too cool! It's my idea, and I'm working with a composer. It will be a dance film though. It's very exciting.



Did you enjoy *Black Swan*?
Is Natalie Portman convincing?
Let us know: gazette@rad.org.uk

I've never seen a ballerina call in sick'

The making of *Black Swan*

DARREN ARONOFSKY

Director

The ballet world was very hard to get into. Usually when you make a movie, doors open up, but the ballet world really couldn't care. They're very insular and self-involved. Slowly we met a few dancers who were interested in sharing their stories. Eventually, Benjamin Millepied came on board, and that gave us a stamp of approval, because he's very well respected.

Very early on I knew I wanted to get the camera onstage with the dancers, because I think when you're in the audience, dance looks effortless – these dancers train all their lives to make all the effort disappear, and then when you go backstage you suddenly see all the muscles and tendons and blood and sweat and breath. As director, how was I going to show that? I would tell Benjamin what was happening in the story, and he would then turn it into movement. Usually when I work with actors, I watch them turn the story into emotion, so it was interesting to see the story transform into a different type of kinetic form. He would choreograph something, and I would look at it, and we would eventually bring the video camera out and start moving with it – so it was almost a third dancing partner.

NATALIE PORTMAN

Plays *Nina, the ballerina*

Ballet dancers have an extreme devotion. [During filming] I was not sleeping much, not eating and training all day. Combining the physical with the emotional was really hard: I was concentrating so much on what I was doing that half the time they were shouting at me not to let my tongue hang out of my mouth. It's not cute. My trainer's biggest focus was making sure I didn't get injured. She was always there with my warm-ups, and if there was a longer break between takes, we would do a barre. We also did six months of toe exercises before I went into pointe shoes. I couldn't believe how painful they were: they're not the most pleasant of implements!

MILA KUNIS

Plays *Lily, the rival dancer*

The way a ballerina holds herself is very specific, and you can only fake that so much. The way they hold their arms, their shoulders are always kept back and the ribcage is tucked in. The physicality really was the hardest thing, just transforming your body at the age of 26. I think everybody in this production who played a dancer got hurt. Both actors and dancers are incredibly competitive, but I think that dancers have a perception of perfection. Actors think that for every part there's something different they could do, that there's no such thing as perfection. I've never met anybody as disciplined as a dancer – ever. I've seen actors call in sick, but I've never seen a ballerina call in sick. It's much more competitive, the ballet world, much more than any other.

VINCENT CASSEL

Plays *Thomas, the ballet director*

Michael Bennett, the director of *A Chorus Line* and *Dreamgirls*, was a good friend of the family when I was younger. So I'd seen him work, and he was very close to what I'm doing in the movie – meaning that he was a real jerk with dancers. But it was only to get them where he wanted them to go. I also saw Mikhail Baryshnikov directing a young dancer, and, interestingly, he wasn't moving at all. There are also documentaries I've seen about Balanchine. All these people have something in common – they move like they owned the world, or at least the ballet industry.