

Black Swan



by Miles Mathis

After my recent negative review of *Lady Bird*, I thought I should do a positive movie review, to show I don't actually hate everything. But I didn't want to do a review of an old film, since that wouldn't prove anything. I felt I needed to write about a recent film, but I honestly couldn't think of one. At first I thought of *Her*, which I kind of liked. I thought the idea was clever, but I could get worked up enough to actually give it the old Rex Reed five stars. Then a strange thing happened. I watched *Black Swan* online. That's right: I missed it in the theaters back in 2010 and so came to it almost eight years too late. Back then I was down on Aronofsky and Portman and didn't think it would be any good.

But as it turns out, Aronofsky was only the director here. He didn't write it. Which is just as well since I don't like his stories or storytelling. Or, I should say I didn't like any of his previous movies. I am not interested in wrestlers, don't need Noah to be cast as an environmentalist or a Luciferian, don't need to see Jennifer Connolly with things up her tushy, and so on. But if *Black Swan* was Aronofsky's idea, he finally hit on a theme I can relate to.

Same for Natalie Portman. I hadn't liked her in anything since *Leon* and *Beautiful Girls*. As an adult actress, she seemed to me gorgeous but flat, sort of a female Keanu Reeves. As a former ballet dancer myself, I also didn't think a non-professional could realistically portray a ballet dancer. I thought I was sure to be disappointed. Well, I still wouldn't say Portman is an amazing actress here, and I am surprised she won the Oscar. However, she works well for two reasons: one, she has the right look; two, she is sort of type-cast, as we will see. So she doesn't have to actually do much acting. She just has to be herself.

[In 2011 Jennifer Homans](#) of the *New Republic* trashed *Black Swan* as a “fake”. Which means she didn't like it. She didn't like the lead character being written and played as a frigid and mentally unstable girl, which I can understand. As a woman herself, Homans wants to see positive depictions of females. However, this is sort of missing the point here. Yes, Aronofsky *could* have told the story of a healthy ballerina, but he didn't. Why? I guess because he found it more interesting to tell the story of an unhealthy one. Given the previews, Homans can't really have thought she was going to a movie

chronicling sexual health, bright lights, and smiley smiles.

Anyway, I myself generally prefer happy movies, so I can relate to Homans to some extent. I am probably one of the few straight adult males who can watch *Pollyanna* and not get bored, for heaven sakes. I am from another time, in so many ways. I also liked *Definitely Maybe*, which even the 20-something girls of my acquaintance have shamed me for. It was too corny even for them. However, with the proper prompting I can watch a good movie in any genre, even the darkest. For instance, I watched *The Ring* more than once, finding it fascinating. Which all goes to say that I can be made to suspend disbelief as much as anyone, if I see any payoff in it at all.

But, truth be told, I didn't have to suspend disbelief to watch *Black Swan*. I am perfectly able to believe in frigid and unbalanced females, in and out of ballet, since I have come into direct contact with dozens of them. I have dated some of them, so I have seen the beast up close and personal. And I can tell you that *Black Swan* is no exaggeration. It is a surrealization and possibly a simplification, but not an exaggeration.

Online, the film is sold as horror, but I don't read it that way. It is a psycho-sexual drama, with some surreal twists thrown in. So it is doubly and triply odd that I liked it. I don't generally like psycho-sexual dramas or surrealism in cinema. I haven't liked any of the films Aronofsky refers to when talking about his influences for *Black Swan*, including Polanski's films. I don't like *Repulsion* or *The Tenant*. But I liked *Black Swan* very much.

What I liked most about it is that it got better as it went on. How rare is that in Hollywood? I went in highly skeptical, as I said. The opening scenes were only promising: visually rewarding in many ways, but with a couple of misfires nonetheless. Yes, Jennifer Homans, a couple of the early sexual comments in the film were over-the-top and unrealistic, the storyline could have proceeded with a bit more subtlety, and watching Portman dance from the waist up was curious. I am certainly not selling the film as a perfect example of screenwriting or direction. However, if you can overlook those early glitches, it is worth it, because the film crescendoes and ends on a major high. The next to the last scenes are a thrill, and I was left exhilarated: something I can't say about any film in recent memory. The story, directing, and acting all came together in the final thirty minutes in a way I have rarely seen. I very much look forward to seeing it a second time.

Now, about Portman being type-cast. I don't say that because I think she is unbalanced. She may be, but I have no evidence of it. I say that because, like her character Nina, she seems to have a far easier time playing the white swan than the black. Portman isn't convincing in other films as either a dark character or as a sexual being. She was much sexier at age 14 stomping snow and teasing Timothy Hutton in *Beautiful Girls* than she has been in anything since—which is kind of curious if you think about it. To me, she now comes across as a newer-model Natalie Wood or Audrey Hepburn: lovely but cold. Drones of other Hollywood actresses affect me the same way: Nicole Kidman, Michelle Pfeiffer, Charlize Theron, Jennifer Aniston, Emma Watson, Keira Knightley, Taylor Swift*, and so on. They are nice to look at, but I couldn't imagine sleeping with them. To be fair, the males in Hollywood also come off as Stepford Wives, and I suspect it is something endemic to the field or the place. Perhaps these people have sublimated all sexuality into their work. Or maybe they are really hot when gay, and only come off cold when playing straight. I don't know. But, as I say, I don't think Portman was convincing in the role because she is such a great actress. I think she was convincing in the role because—in many ways—she was simply playing herself. Maybe I'm wrong.

It doesn't really matter. . . except that acting will always fall short of the real thing. No matter how

good an actor is at playing gay, for instance, a real gay will play the part better. In the same way, the only thing better than acting frigid is *being* frigid, and I suspect Hollywood has no shortage of those perfect for the role.

I also have to say that those who huff and puff, taking offense at ballerinas being depicted as frigid or sexually repressed have to be kidding us. Like many other things, it is a cliché not because it is false, but because it is so often true. That is the definition of cliché. Yes, that does mean that Aronofsky therefore doesn't get credit for some sort of new idea here. He has broken no psychological ground, and might even be accused of being too obvious. The first part of the movie *almost* falls to that critique, as I said above. However, *Black Swan* does provide some twists we haven't seen before, and those twists combine with the special effects in the final part of the film to create something I found both convincing and provoking. You may as well. We are told audiences at Cannes and other places stood up and cheered, and for once I can believe they did that without being paid.

I still think Aronofsky is a spook—like everyone else in Hollywood and worldwide cinema—but for whatever reason this film worked for me. Having witnessed the specific pathology firsthand and at close range, I found it thrilling to see it presented in such an entertaining fashion. Doubly thrilling were the special effects at the end, which really did add something to the old Swan Lake story.

I suspect the film was green-lighted—at least in part—with the hopes it would drive everyone a little crazier, twisting the knife in an already strained male-female dialectic. However, in my opinion it mostly fails to do that. I could be wrong, but I hope it doesn't further romanticize the crazy female. To my eyes, it looks more like a morality play, warning young women *away* from this path. But who knows? Not being an already-imbalanced-by-years-of-propaganda young girl, I am not the target audience. Perhaps some young women were prompted by the movie to move another step nearer the precipice. Let us all hope not.

*I see Swift as an actress playing a pop star.