Dark Beauty

A tense thriller, with ballerinas

by CRAIG LAMBERT

In the new film Black Swan, Natalie Portman ’03 plays Nina, a prima ballerina in New York who dances the Swan Queen in Tchaikovsky’s Swan Lake as her first starring role. That means portraying both a White Swan who radiates innocence, sweetness, and light, and a darker Black Swan—seductive, dangerous, and evil. An overprotected, driven perfectionist, Nina readily takes to the white swan, but must endure a kind of personal purgatory to claim the dark side of both the ballet role and her personality.

Lily (Mila Kunis), another beautiful dancer who becomes Nina’s friend and rival, catalyzes this metamorphosis. In the hands of tenebrous film director Darren Aronofsky ’91 (The Wrestler, Requiem for a Dream), the story becomes one of almost unrelieved tension, a thriller that probes psychological, artistic, and even spiritual allegories as Nina finds herself in the midst of what is tantamount to a nervous breakdown. Black Swan’s most characteristic shot is a close-up of Portman’s captivating face, her eyes flickering with anxiety. Even the final scene sends the audience home with unresolved questions to ponder.

Aronofsky began to consider this story 15 years ago. In fact, “It all started with my sister, who was a ballet dancer when I was a kid,” he says; he witnessed her grueling training regime. When he completed his M.F.A. at the American Film Institute Conservatory, he was already thinking about making two companion films, one set in the world of pro wrestling, one in that of professional ballet. “Some call wrestling the lowest of art forms, and some call ballet the highest of art forms, yet there is something elementally
Nina must endure a personal purgatory to claim the dark side of the role and of her personality.

the same,” Aronofsky explains. “Mickey Rourke as a wrestler was going through something very similar to Natalie Portman as a ballerina. They’re both artists who use their bodies to express themselves and they’re both threatened by physical injury, because their bodies are the only tools they have for expression. What was interesting for me was to find these two connected stories in what might appear to be unconnected worlds.” In Black Swan, “We wanted to be tense, and to make a thriller,” he explains. “To have the horrific elements contrasting with the beauty and sexuality of ballet made for an interesting construction.”

Long before the screenplay was ready, Aronofsky had decided that Portman was the right actress for the lead. The two had met for coffee in Times Square more than 10 years ago to talk about the idea. Portman studied ballet as a child and has continued to dance to stay in shape; she told the director that she had always wanted to play a dancer. To prepare for the film, she undertook 10 months of intense physical training that consumed five hours a day, including swimming, weight lifting, and other cross-training, as well as intensive dance work with choreographer Benjamin Millepied, a principal dancer with the New York City Ballet; in the end, she danced 90 percent of the film’s ballet scenes herself. (American Ballet Theatre soloist Sarah Lane performed some exacting point work and turns as Portman’s double.) “It’s incredibly challenging, trying to pick up ballet at 28,” Portman says. “Even if you’ve taken dance lessons before, you just don’t realize how much goes into it at the elite level. Every small gesture has to be so specific and so full of lightness and grace.”

At the start of the film, Nina is a “bunhead”—dancers’ unflattering term for a ballerina so obsessively devoted to her art that she has no life outside it. A Signet Society member and psychology concentrator at Harvard, Portman saw Nina as “being caught in a cycle of obsession and compulsion. The positive side of that for artists and dancers is that by focusing so hard you can become a virtuoso, but then there’s a much darker side, an unhealthy side, in which you can become completely lost. That’s where I had to take Nina.”

Chapter & Verse
Correspondence on not-so-famous lost words

J.P. Akins requests the complete text of a poem he remembers from his youth about the Harvard-Yale game and the way it “releases us, changed and changeless, into the November evening.” He thinks it may be the work of the late David McCord ’21, L.H.D. ’56.

From our archives, here are more as-yet-unsourced phrases and aphorisms, in hopes that a reappearance, in print and online, will yield identifications.

“Whereas the music of Beethoven aspires to heaven, the music of Mozart was written from there.”

“…and rain, that graybeard sing…”

“…easier to imagine the weather putting something off because of Miss …”

“…like one of the seven deadly sins wrapped up in the cloak of the other six.”

“Alas, we would no longer be able to listen to the music of Mozart.”

“Cynicism is the fruit of disappointed hopes that were never well justified to begin with.”

“Lust is the lamp that lifts the gloom./Lust is the light that fills the room.”

Send inquiries and answers to Chapter and Verse, Harvard Magazine, 7 Ware Street, Cambridge 02138, or via e-mail to chapterandverse@harvardmag.com.
Music figures heavily in establishing *Black Swan*’s atmosphere of foreboding. “It became clear that this was a tremendously musical film,” says Robert Kraft ’76, president of Fox Music, who was involved in the relevant decisions for the Fox Searchlight Pictures release. “You have Tchaikovsky’s incredible ballet music and a fantastic original underscore written by [English composer] Clint Mansell. I was in London with Darren for every minute of the orchestral recording. It was glorious. It sounded as beautiful as I had dreamed.” Mansell explains that he wanted the *Swan Lake* music to haunt Nina during her stormy passage. “Tchaikovsky’s score is so wonderfully complex,” he says. “It tells the story in every note. But modern film scores are more subdued, more minimalist if you will, so I had to almost deconstruct the ballet.” Aronofsky adds, “Clint took Tchaikovsky’s masterpiece and turned it into scary movie music.”

The dark beauty of the Russian master’s score infuses *Black Swan* with its magic. Filled with themes of ego and alter ego, images of mirrors, and paradoxes of the psyche, *Black Swan* itself explores aspects of the art that created it. “There are lots of ideas about the artistic process in the film,” Aronofsky says. “There’s a struggle between control and letting go. In any craft, you have to learn to do both.”

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**Storytelling with Sondheim**

*Librettist John Weidman writes books for the best.*

**Act I:** John Weidman ’68 spends the first 13 years of his life in Westport, Connecticut, where he plays Little League baseball and dreams of turning pro. Then he realizes: “There are no major league players from Westport.” His revised attitude about the future: “Wait and see.”

**Act II, Scene 1:** Weidman (wid-eman) at Harvard. His father is a writer (the novelist and dramatist Jerome Weidman, author of *I Can Get It for You Wholesale*), so it’s only natural that he befriends Timothy Crouse ’68, the son of playwright Russel Crouse, who coauthored the book for *The Sound of Music*. In 1966, on a lark, they write the Hasty Pudding show *A Hit and a Myth*. (“Nothing seemed at stake. And we got to go to Bermuda.”)

**Act II, Scene 2:** Weidman graduates. He extends his “Wait and see” credo by applying to law school. Facing the draft, he chooses not to attend Yale immediately, and instead teaches for a few years at a New York public school. Then he heads to New Haven to join Clarence Thomas in the Yale Law class of 1974.

Certain that the law is not for him, Weidman writes two letters, seeking an internship. The first goes to Bowie Kuhn, commissioner of Major League Baseball, who blows him off. The second—with a postscript: “I have an idea for a play about the opening of Japan; can we talk about it?”—goes to Broadway producer-director Hal Prince. Weidman: “At Harvard, I majored in East Asian history—I thought I knew something no one else did. I had no ambition to write a play. I had no training. I just thought: I can do this while I’m at Yale.”

**Act II, Scene 3:** Prince meets with Weidman for 15 minutes before giving him a contract (and $500) to write the play. In the summer of 1973, Weidman completes a draft of *Pacific Overtures*. Prince decides it needs to be a musical—and convinces Stephen Sondheim to turn the play into one. Weidman: “It was so surreal I didn’t stop—at least not too often—to think...