



# TREASURES FROM THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

AN ONGOING SERIES OF CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY FILMS PRESENTED ON FILM BY THE YALE FILM STUDY CENTER

SUNDAY

DECEMBER 4, 2016

4:00PM • WHITNEY  
HUMANITIES CENTER

# BLACK SWAN

PRESENTED WITH  
SUPPORT FROM  
PAUL L. JOSKOW  
'70 M.PHIL., '72 PH.D.



Darren Aronofsky's *BLACK SWAN* begins within a dream. Yet even in her dreams, the dancer Nina Sayers (played by Natalie Portman in an Oscar-winning performance) is controlled and conscribed by the fantasies of men. Following Benjamin Millepied's choreography in a ballet by Tchaikovsky about swan-women in the thrall of sorcerer Von Rothbart, Nina takes her first onerific steps into the tale of an artist at risk of annihilation in the pursuit of an all-consuming role. As the dreamworld of the film grows increasingly nightmarish, we recoil and delight at an exquisitely monstrous hybrid of psychological thriller and hyperbolic melodrama, one that blends Cronenbergian body horror with *vérité* naturalism, owing as much to phantasmagoria and the Grand Guignol as to the exalted milieu of classical ballet. Critics have described *BLACK SWAN* as "an inky, unhinged fairy tale," "audaciously whacked-out," "unashamedly pulpy," and "high-art trash" with "giddy, sometimes sleazy exploitation-cinema savvy" (words that would not suggest a film that so rigorously adheres to such an austere and muted color palette). Though the film's dichotomy between high and low art forms divided critics and audiences alike, it received five Academy Award nominations, becoming only the fifth horror film nominated for Best Picture.



Aronofsky's engagement with Nina began with an earlier film, *THE WRESTLER*, which he originally envisioned as a love story between the title character and a ballerina. Like *THE WRESTLER* and so much of Aronofsky's work, *BLACK SWAN* foregrounds the extreme physical agony and ecstasy inherent to the protagonist's pursuits. "Wrestling some consider the lowest art—if they would even call it art—and ballet some people consider the highest," Aronofsky observed. "But what was amazing to me was how similar the performers in both of these worlds are. They both make incredible use of their bodies to express themselves." That physical expressiveness is exemplified in the camerawork of *BLACK SWAN* as well, with Aronofsky's frequent cinematographer Matthew Libatique using hand-held Canon digital and Arriflex Super 16mm cameras with a dancer-like agility. "*BLACK SWAN* is something like a 100-minute swoon," writes J. Hoberman. "The camera lurches, leaps, and pirouettes; in some scenes, it feels as if it's being tossed around the stage along with Portman." Portman has spoken of the grace of Libatique's Oscar-nominated camerawork, saying she related to the camera as a scene partner, particularly in her many solo scenes in the film. The film was produced with a modest \$13 million budget (it has grossed over 25 times that amount to date), and was shot in just 43 days. This included a week of exteriors in New York City, with most of the interior filming taking place at SUNY Purchase's Performing Arts Center during winter break. The footage was augmented by extensive use of CGI (visible from the first fade-in), masterfully unsettling sound design by Craig Henighan, and a reworking of Tchaikovsky's score by Clint Mansell.

DIRECTED BY **DARREN ARONOFSKY**  
PRODUCED BY **FOX SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES**  
(2010) 108 MINS.  
STARRING **NATALIE PORTMAN, MILA KUNIS,  
VINCENT CASSEL, BARBARA HERSHEY,  
WINONA RYDER, AND BENJAMIN MILLEPIED**

Given that Aronofsky has described Tchaikovsky's Swan Queen as a "were-swan," it is not surprising that he drew from cinema's long and lurid history of ballet horror films when choosing his themes and motifs. Kenneth Turan described *BLACK SWAN* as a "shotgun marriage of *THE RED SHOES* and Roger Corman," but its many cinematic influences also include the earliest mirror tricks of Méliès and, perhaps most prominently, the claustrophobia, paranoia, and mental disintegrations of Polanski's "Apartment Trilogy." The result is a film about excess and transgression, gore and gloss, female rivalries manipulated by an obsessive maestro, female bodies manipulated through identity-disrupting digital effects, and a heroine cursed with the dual role of villain and victim in her dark dance with perfection. As Hoberman writes, "Kitsch this bombastic becomes something primal."

**DID YOU KNOW:** THE PHYSICAL THERAPY SCENE IN *BLACK SWAN* WAS NOT STAGED. PORTMAN SUSTAINED A CONCUSSION AND DISLOCATED A RIB DURING PRODUCTION, AND ARONOFSKY FILMED ONE OF HER MANY THERAPY SESSIONS, ASKING HER TO STAY IN CHARACTER DURING THE HARROWING TREATMENTS. THE THERAPIST, MICHELLE RODRIGUEZ NOUEL, BECAME PERHAPS THE ONLY PHYSICAL THERAPIST EVER THANKED DURING AN ACADEMY AWARD ACCEPTANCE SPEECH.

**NEXT UP:** CYCLING! THE MAFIA! MUSIC HALL SINGERS! AN OBESE DOG! JOIN US AS MADAME SOUZA SETS OUT TO RESCUE HER GRANDSON IN SYLVAIN CHOMET'S AWARD-WINNING 2003 ANIMATED FEATURE **THE TRIPLETS OF BELLEVILLE**, SCREENING IN 35MM ON **FRIDAY, JANUARY 13 AT 7:00 P.M.**