Black Swan

R

108 Minutes

Rating: *****

I know, dear reader, just what you are thinking: Can Black Swan possibly be as good as advertised? And can Natalie Portman, who first became famous for playing the innocent sci-fi heroine Padme in the Star Wars prequels, really deliver the goods as a tormented, fractured spirit who loses her soul in the quest for her art? Is Black Swan really a must-see cinematic experience?

Absolutely.

Director Darren Aronofsky has done more than hit a home run with Black Swan—he has, in fact, created a picture that is bound to be unlike anything else the cinema will give us in 2011. Black Swan is many things: a psychological case study; a cry of solidarity for repressed souls everywhere; a coming out party for Natalie Portman; a promotion for and a warning against the power of art to express, and consume; and a tragedy of incredible proportions. As a director, Aronofsky crafts each scene masterfully, establishing tone and refining image with surgical precision. The atmosphere of unease is palpable from the beginning, and never relents. And yet despite the anxiety that underlies the whole picture, there is also beauty—not only in the persons of the two lead actresses (Portman and her rival, Mila Kunis), but in the world of art (dance, to be precise) in which they live and dream.

For Portman, this is the kind of performance that Heath Ledger delivered as the Joker in The Dark Knight. Her portrayal of Nina, the young and ambitious but repressed and fragile dancer who is obsessed with becoming the perfect embodiment of the Swan Queen and her evil sister as well, is a wonder to behold. Portman will win a lot of acclaim for this role, and she should. Her Nina is never less than totally sympathetic, even as she gradually succumbs to madness. Her ultimate transformation into the Black Swan is an unforgettable climax as seductive as it is terrible.

Lost in all the accolades is the script, developed from a story by Andres Heinz. The screenplay is sensitive and daring, and displays a remarkable insight into the human psyche. The soundtrack has to be great, considering the story revolves around a production of Swan Lake, and it is. Supporting performances by Vincent Cassel, Winona Ryder, and Barbara Hershey are likewise brilliant.

Black Swan is a modern classic. Don’t miss it.