

# The darker side of ballet illuminated?

Words by **Thérèse Wynn-Davies**

Natalie Portman in her Oscar winning role as Nina. Pic: [www.images4.fanpop.com](http://www.images4.fanpop.com)

**T**he desperation, jealous, determined and stretched females within the dance industry are pushed to the maximum of their mental and physical states to obtain the most 'perfect' performance. Nina, played by Natalie Portman, the central character in the *Black Swan* centralises on these themes and ideologies, taking them ever so slightly schizophrenically further.

Portman gives an astonishing performance in this film, having trained every day for a full year in ballet before filming. This has brought on some debate as she lost another 20lbs from her already tiny frame, highlighting the pressures of appearance that so many dancers face.

A training ballet dancer, Rebecca Westlake, 20, talks about the fear of eating disorders by saying "The fact she had to starve herself is manifesting the cruel reality of the business

## Is this Hollywood blockbuster and multi award winning film an accurate portrayal of what goes on behind the curtain wings?

and the harsh truth about how much the 'perfect' figure is desired. I completely respect them for at least attempting to expose how dark the ballet world really is, albeit in a slightly Hollywood fashion."

Nina's dreams of becoming the principal dancer of the new show *Swan Lake* come true when she is cast as the White Swan, however, within this role she also needs to learn how to become the Black Swan, a dark and powerful character, totally opposing her 'nice' personality and strong technical style of dance.

She lives with her domineering mother, performed by Barbara Her-

shey, who is also displaying some subtle signs of mental illness. She plays the faultless 'pushy mother' that is so often witnessed in the dance industry. She is living her life through Nina as she had to give up her promising career as a dancer after becoming pregnant and then abandoned and ignored by the father.

**N**ina has to explore the deeper sides of her personality in order to dance the role of a lifetime, the *Black Swan* to its full evil, possessing and dominating nature.

The film also exposes how quickly a dancer's career is over. They are

fighting with the inevitable signs of aging but much more than the average woman. The audience joins the story at a stage where the principle dancer is being given the boot as she is too old. Winona Ryder's character, Beth Macintyre also has a breakdown, throwing herself in front of a car and permanently damaging her legs. These horrific images play on Nina's mind, as she can see herself becoming this and is trying to do anything to avoid this outcome.

The dance industry is secretive and demanding, although this film is a dramatisation on these facts, it is true that a lot of these situations do go on. This passion for perfection ultimately destroys Nina as she battles with her sexuality, eating disorders, drug abuse, self harm and a mental illness that is fighting to win. She is found collapsed backstage after the most perfect and soul searching performance of her life; what she has

lived to do.

**Black Swan Interesting Film Facts** from behind the scenes:

-Nina's name in the original screenplay was Alexandria

-The script took around ten years to make it to the screen

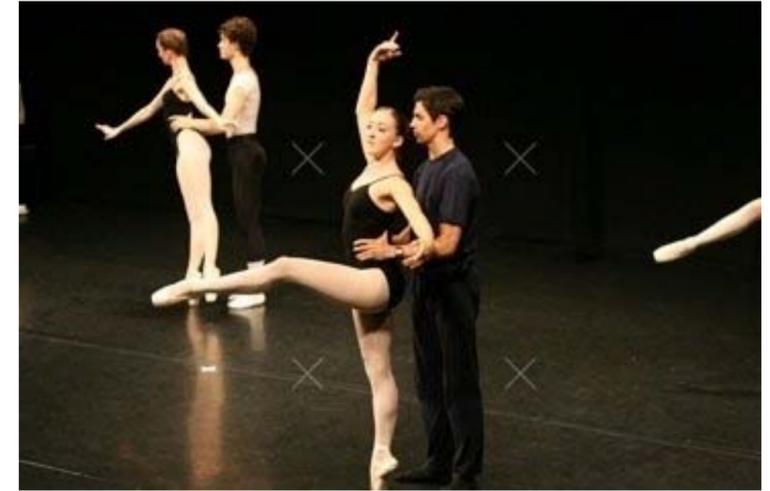
-The soundtrack, composed by Clint Mansell is a backward and twisted variation of Tchaikovsky's "Swan Lake" ballet.

-Natalie Portman sustained a twisted rib during the filming of a dance sequence and a full recovery took six weeks. During the filming of later dance sequences, she was lifted from her arm pits rather than her sides to avoid repeating the damage.

-There is a mirror or a type of reflective surface in nearly every shot of the film. The only noticeable place where there isn't one is when Nina is on stage, during the film's climax, performing the *Black Swan*, when her 'dark side' has taken over.

# Eighty pairs of shoes later, and still in love

“ I really knew I loved dancing. I just enjoyed being on the stage. I think the feeling of just being so happy when doing something is what made me love it even more.”



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The past three years has seen 20 year-old, Nicole Henman dance her way through around 80 pairs of pointé shoes. That's a lot of shoes, but for the average ballet dancer, this is perfectly normal.

“To try and prevent buying new shoes I used wood hardener on the soles but this generally only allowed for another two days wear” she tells me. But it's not just the style of ballet that made her fall in love it was also the performing it. To show an audience what she can do, the adrenaline rush and the atmosphere of the performance itself.

Nicole started dancing at the age of three and although she has since been trained in several other forms of dance ranging from tap to contemporary, ballet was always her calling card. Her strong technique helped her to develop the intense training that ballet puts on the individual.

“I always wanted to get the technique right and understand the steps I was doing, perfect them alone. I didn't really develop my performance until my teens when I understood that dancing wasn't just about the steps but about the emotion

too and this was when I really knew I loved dancing and just enjoyed being on the stage. I think the feeling of just being so happy when doing something is what made me love it even more.”

Nicole decided to take her hobby, outside of school, and turn to something more serious and life changing. At the age of 16 and just finishing her GCSEs, she was successful at gaining a place at the Central School of Ballet. She

was swept up from a very normal life in a small town called Worthing in the South of England and was soon an academic ballet dancer living in the central city of London. She describes it as ‘an unbelievable experience’ spending three years dedicating her life to becoming the dancer that she is today. She is a moving work of art.

“The opportunity to train with such professionals and take in all

their information and experience is so amazing. The first two years are fundamental in strengthening your technique and broadening your dance knowledge. But the third year was, by far, the most useful in terms of becoming a dancer. Ballet Central, the third year touring company, gives you so much performing experience and the chance to develop further as a dancer.”

All of this may seem like an excruciating amount of hard work, but for someone who loves ballet as much as Nicole, this was a dream come true. She has had the chance to perform in over 25 locations across the UK, work with the best choreographers in the business, perform

a range of dance styles and enjoy every moment of it!

Although Nicole talks with such passion about her ballet experiences, there are some aspects of it that she is strongly against. This is the stereotype that all dancers should be tall, skinny and flexible. Many dancers turn up for auditions but are turned away without any opportunity based on the way that they look.

“I firmly believe this system is wrong and that you don't have to be ‘skinny, tall and flexible’ to be classed as a good dancer.”

Nicole is eager to continue with her experiences of ballet and have a career within the industry despite its difficulty and pressures, and I for one cannot wait to see her up on that stage in her favourite ballet: Swan Lake.

“ I understood that dancing wasn't just about the steps but about the emotion too and this was when I really knew I loved dancing ”



# Is ballet ever without secret scandals and shocking stories?

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**T**he Bolshoi ballet director, Gennady Yanin, has quit his position after erotic pictures of him were published online and emailed to thousands of people across Russia and beyond. When hearing this story, you might notice the comparisons with the extreme lives of the characters featured in the film, *The Black Swan*.

The ballet world has always been full of secrets and this exposure will come as a huge blow to the industry. The Russian Ballet Company, Bolshoi, was expected to lose the artistic director, Anatoly Iksanov this week, but his contract was suddenly renewed although a lot of his responsibilities, including high-level appointments, were taken away

from him and handed to the Russian ministry of culture.

The company itself was previously hot in the public eye in 2003 after its prima ballerina, Anastasia Volochkova was fired for being 'too heavy'. This was swept up by tabloid magazines and she has since dedicated her time to exposing the darker side of the Bolshoi Ballet Company. She appeared on Russian television to state that the only way into a progressive career within the company is via the bedroom.

It is astonishing that ballet is presented on stage as something that is so graceful and beautiful can have such graphic, bloody horrors going on behind the curtains.

A BBC Documentary looking behind the scenes at the English National Ballet shows the intense hard

work and daily pressures that are put on the dancers to get the best performances. It's appropriately called 'Agony and Ecstasy: A year with the National Ballet' and promises to be an eye-opener into the highly competitive and relatively unknown business.

I'm not just writing about the industry as a member of the audience, I've been there, in my own modest way. I have been in and out of the dance industry since the age of 3. I was always encouraged by my parents not to take myself too seriously whilst dancing. As I progressed through my ballet and eventually got a bit better, I qualified for regional and national final competitions in London. My parents weren't keen for me to continue, but they let me experience it anyway. I realised



Gennady Yanin performing in Cinderella. Pic: www.dance.net

through these competitions that I had been quite 'sheltered' in my dancing experience so far. These girls were a different breed. They wouldn't talk to anyone. 'Sneering' was their only facial expression until they were on stage. Then they would become something beautiful. Their mothers too, were exceptional.

**I**n my dance classes we were all friends and met up outside class. Dancing had always been something I enjoyed, and I wasn't enjoying these types of situations where I was ignored and judged. In these circumstances, it was a case of survival of the fittest. I knew a career in dancing wasn't for me.

Ballet seems to have appeared more frequently in the news media, perhaps as a way of combating the

obesity surge. There are classes, very popular in London and New York, that combine exercises that ballerinas do at the bar and Pilates as a way of toning the muscles and 'making your legs look like ballerinas legs'.

The world of ballet has always been secretly fascinating to the people that aren't involved in it. It is a secular and pressurising way of life which doesn't promise to last long. Most dancers cannot continue in the industry after a certain age. There is no promise of fame or fortune, but still there are thousands of men and women who are willing to push their bodies to the maximum. Ballet is a graphic, historical art form that will never change and as the saying goes, 'no pain, no beauty.' I think I would rather be in the audience than on the stage.



The Big Ballet. Pic www.telegraph.co.uk

## Bigger dancers for the Big Ballet

**F**or the first time in its 16 year history, the all female Big Ballet has dropped its 17st minimum weight to 15st.

The tour producers has blamed the very popular and increasingly successful healthy eating campaigns, such as those waged by Jamie Oliver for the fall in the number of suitable candidates.

Tour producer of the Russian dance company, Alexej Ignatow, said: "The number of hopefuls weighing 17 stone has dropped significantly, coinciding with sustained global campaigns for healthier eating, perhaps most notably spearhead-

ed by celebrity chiefs such as Jamie Oliver." The 16-strong alternative group was set up to challenge social standards in the ballet world and dancers weighed in at just under an average 20st during the last UK tour in 2008. The 40-date tour starts in Eastbourne, March 1, and ends in Darlington, April 18.

The Big Ballet troupe was established 16 years ago by renowned Russian choreographer Evgeny Panfilo to prove that bigger women could still move elegantly.

In 2000 the Big Ballet troupe won the top Golden Mask performing arts award in Russia.