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# Russian Family Still Strong for Aronofsky

By Nellee Holmes

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LOS ANGELES — Film director Darren Aronofsky, whose latest movie "Black Swan" opened in Russia on Saturday, gained inspiration for the film from a visit to St. Petersburg, he said in a recent interview.

"Black Swan" is set in the New York ballet world and stars Natalie Portman as the perfectionist ballerina Nina. Cast in the lead role of a new production of "Swan Lake," Nina is the ideal Odette, the innocent white swan princess, but is pushed by choreographer Thomas (played by Vincent Cassel) to develop her portrayal of Odette's double Odile — the seductive black swan.

It is one thing to lose yourself in your art. Caught up in a web of intrigue involving a younger rival, Lily, who effortlessly embodies the black swan (Ukrainian-born actress Mila Kunis), Portman's ballerina loses her mind.

"Mila's Slavonic ancestry did influence us at the start," Aronofsky said. " We thought about her having an accent, since ballet is so international, but as we worked on the character we

liked her coming from San Francisco better."

The Brooklyn-born Aronofsky is keenly conscious of his Russian heritage.

"I feel a deep connection to Russia," he said. "My grandparents came from Russia and so many of my family traditions are connected to the country."

The director, whose previous films include "Requiem for a Dream" (2000), and "The Wrestler" (2008), said he had originally been attracted to ballet because of his connection to actors.

"When you are in front of the curtain, it's all beauty and light. When you go backstage, you see the dancers are out of breath and sweaty — it's anything but effortless. And you realize there is all this competition. As a director, that got me really excited."

What were the major influences on the film? "More than any other film I've done, this one has been compared to other's people work," he said. "The biggest influence was Tchaikovsky's ballet 'Swan Lake.' We tried to build the entire film from the fairy tale."

Aronofsky visited St. Petersburg several years ago when he brought his last film, "The Wrestler," which was nominated for two Oscars, to the city.

"I loved St. Petersburg when I visited with 'The Wrestler;' I can't wait to get back," he said. "I hope to bring 'Black Swan' to the city. When I was in St. Petersburg, I took in a production of 'Swan Lake.' The ballet was amazing, the dancers were staggeringly beautiful, and the musicians were tremendous. But I was stunned that the production had a happy ending. I'd never seen it before! And in Russia? Needless to say, my film's ending isn't as bright."

Aronofsky is now working on his next project, a new adventure thriller titled "The Tiger." The movie, based on John Vaillant's book "The Tiger: A True Story of Vengeance and Survival," has been optioned by Focus Features, with Brad Pitt potentially taking a leading role.

The story tells the tale of poachers in the Primorye region in Russia's Far East who are tracked and hunted by an "almost" supernaturally powerful Siberian tiger.

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