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I MADE NATALIE A BALLERINA



Oscar-winner Natalie trained from 5.30am until midnight for the *Black Swan* lead

What went on behind the scenes of *Black Swan*? Ballet coach Mary Helen Bowers reveals all

WHEN a pregnant Natalie Portman tearfully accepted the Best Actress Oscar for her role in *Black Swan*, one of the first people she thanked was Mary Helen Bowers.

The 31-year-old ballet coach moved from her New York home to LA and spent more than a year training Natalie for the role of troubled dancer Nina.

"When Natalie won, I was just so emotional," the former New York City Ballet member says. "It was very exciting...I was flattered to be remembered in that magical moment."

While the film only hit the big screen this year, Mary Helen was first approached to help out with the project in 2008.

Now a respected teacher, she had danced with the film's choreographer (and Natalie's fiance) Benjamin Millepied at the NYC Ballet after leaving home at 15 to pursue her love of dance.

Black Swan director Darren Aronofsky told her he wanted the film to be as authentic as possible, which meant turning Natalie's figure into a realistic ballet body – with high arches, slim hips and willowy arms.

And true to Natalie's perfectionist reputation, combined with Mary

Helen's training, they achieved it.

"When I first met Natalie I was blown away with how beautiful she was," Mary Helen says.

"She's an incredible woman – and so dedicated to her craft she learned to live the life of a professional ballerina.

"It is a tough profession. As you see in *Black Swan* it's so physically demanding and the days are so long. You need to be able to live and breathe ballet. You wake up, stretch, have a class, rehearse all day, perform at night, sleep and repeat. There's no room for anything else."

The next few months were exciting yet exhausting – Mary Helen's training was particularly hardcore. The daily coaching routine would begin at 5.30am, when she and Natalie would swim 2.5km before an all-day session of dancing, exercising and cross-training.

The long hours were the toughest challenge the actress faced during their time together.

"Natalie would often say to me, 'My body isn't designed to be dancing at this hour!' when we were up past midnight training.

"Even a professional ballerina wouldn't have trained as long and as



WORDS: JEFF MASH PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

Professional dancer-turned-teacher Mary Helen transformed Natalie into a willowy ballerina

hard as we did before *Black Swan*," admits Mary Helen.

So what did she think of the film, with its depiction of dancers plagued by eating disorders, back-stabbing bitchiness and mental breakdowns?

"You have to think about being a ballerina as like being an athlete. You need to eat. Food is your fuel. Without that energy you can't perform. As for the rivalry – of course it exists. It's an extremely competitive industry, but it's also very close-knit."

Other ballet dancers have criticised the film, saying it isn't a reflection of their world and will give people the wrong idea, but Mary Helen disagrees.

"I loved every minute of it – it's such a tremendous film and Darren did a great job of giving ballet a fresh new perspective," she says.

"Of course, it *is* a movie and some things were made dramatic but I love the film – it's made ballet sexy!"

GET NATALIE PORTMAN'S BLACK SWAN BODY

1. THE BRIDGE

This exercise targets important ballet muscles on the inside and back of the legs and the butt. Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet slightly apart. Pull your stomach in flat and close your knees together. Lift your hips up high, then lower them down, not quite touching the mat. Squeeze your butt tightly as you lift each time. Repeat 30 times.

2. ATTITUDE LIFTS

Start on your hands and knees and extend one leg high behind you. Bend the knee, pulling your stomach in flat. Lift the leg higher and then lower back down to hip height. Repeat 30 times, change legs.

3. DIPS

In a sitting position, place your hands just behind your hips with your legs in front of you and your knees bent. Keep your chest open and your stomach pulled flat. (Beginners can keep their feet flat with both feet on the floor.) Pull in and lift the hips off the floor, stretching the elbows. You can lift the heels to demi-pointe if advanced and extend one knee high. Bend the elbows slightly and straighten. Repeat 30 times.