

The Highlights - Personal Best

Personal Best was a film released in 1982, the year before I was born. It stars Mariel Hemingway, the granddaughter of Ernest Hemingway (1), and other people that I will talk about later in this essay. The film is known now, if it is known at all (it was a box office flop), as a lesbian movie. Though it features a principal lesbian relationship and a substantial number of sex scenes, it is in fact a movie about the entanglement of athleticism and intimacy, and the promise and hazards of a life dedicated to competition. I can't recall if someone introduced me to the film or I came across it myself. Either way, I had my first sexual dream after watching it, which probably means I was young.



Tory Skinner (Patrice Donnelly), Chris Cahill (Mariel Hemingway), and Terry Tingloff (Scott Glenn)

In brief, *Personal Best* follows two pentathletes (2), Chris Cahill (Hemingway) and Tory Skinner (played by Patrice Donnelly, a real Olympic hurdler), as they prepare for the 1980 Olympic trials and fall in love with one another (3). They are, knowingly, training for a competition that will never be realized: though the trials were still held in Eugene, Oregon, the United States boycotted the summer Olympics, set to take place in Moscow, due to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (4). Likewise, Chris and Tory's three-year relationship inevitably dissolves under the strain of competing directly against one another. Sacrificing for each other becomes too costly when the stakes are raised (5). They both work with the same coach, the leathery Terry, who is manipulative and exacting bordering on sadistic, and

who also has a fleeting, if coerced, sexual encounter with Chris. I will not spoil much here by revealing that Chris happily ends up with a man, played by the stately Kenny Moore, who, with his feathered hair and endless plaid flannels, was himself a decorated Olympic runner in real life (6).

Hemingway was twenty-one when she filmed *Personal Best*, and despite her muscular frame, she appears far younger. She is tall as a man (7) with hips as narrow and shoulders as broad. Hemingway's nose is pinched, narrow and turned up, her dark green eyes are wide-set and her cheekbones high and broad (in the film they refer to her character's "Indian" heritage). Hemingway's forehead and jaw are square and angular but sometimes soften, and sit on a short, thick neck. But the real intrigue of Hemingway's face are her eyebrows, which are dark and thick, in contrast with her stringy blond hair, and hang low above her eyes (8). Hemingway isn't pretty (nor is she a particularly good actress, I might add). She is something far more androgynous and paradoxical than that. Robert Towne, the writer and director of *Personal Best*, understood that quality as rare and captivating, and held long, steady shots over her strapping resplendence to prove it.



Hemingway and Denny Stites (Kenny Moore)

As *Personal Best* was written and directed by a man, it has historically faced sharp criticism not only for its alleged one-dimensional portrayal of a lesbian relationship (9), but also for its lingering, slow motion shots of women's bodies (specifically of their crotches in short shorts) during prolonged training and racing sequences. I am generally sensitive to, and disturbed by, this phenomenon - male directors who ineptly attempt to decipher and portray feminine experience - though in the case of this film, I believe those critics have misplaced

their paramount objective. Towne doesn't slow down the action to better ogle his actresses' smooth and lean asses (10), he does so to describe and manifest their perennial, near-existential condition as athletes, forever rehearsing for The Big One (an absurd circumstance that is only reinforced further by the fact that these particular women are training for an Olympic games that will never occur.) Described as "boldly languorous," by one critic, the tone and pacing of *Personal Best* deliberately mirror the specific experience of its protagonists: athletes who occupy a world of anticipation and arduous repetition worthy of a Samuel Beckett novel. Even their sex is paced, as if needing to conserve vital energy. The film consistently refuses the climax so regularly associated with, and abused in, sports narratives, instead drawing out even its high-stakes competition scenes with extreme slow motion and a limited soundtrack (the score is often the sound of heavy, costal breathing) (11).

Allow me to offer this example: In a single, nearly three minute, dialogue-less take - an eternity by movie standards - at the height of their training, Chris and Tory ascend a steep sand dune side by side in the central California coast. Set to a minimal, mounting soundtrack and their increasingly heavy gasps of spectral breath, the scene shows the athletes driving their gleaming, sinuous bodies desperately forward and upward. Lactic acid mounts and burns with each protracted step. I watch the take several times over and sense my own muscles begin to throb and spasm (or is it just my memory playing tricks on me?). By the scene's end, Chris and Tory nearly crawl up the slope to finish, their bare feet and hands disappearing into the soft, hot sand. The grueling scene is, for me, the movie's real crux. It's sensory and primal, allowing us idle viewers, for a brief moment, to truly understand what it means to live through our bodies (12) and the need to punish them in order to find their ecstatic limits.

Unlike most other 'sports' movies, *Personal Best* is interested in the stakes and conditions of competition above the competition itself. More than a narrative of homosexual love and loss, it should be viewed as an acute, avant garde study of corporeal endurance, desire, physicality, and control. As Terry describes the pentathlon, and more generally a life dedicated to competitive athletics: "It's a masochists [game]...and it will always end in failure."

NOTES

1. The two Hemingways never met; Ernest committed suicide several months before Mariel, his second granddaughter, was born.
2. Considered the most demanding contest in track and field, the women's pentathlon is

comprised of five events: the 60 meter hurdles, the high jump, the shot put, the long jump, and the 800 and the 800 meters. It is scored in cumulative points.

3. Both protagonist's names are glaringly androgynous.

4. The Soviets were fighting the Taliban, who were being supported by Ronald Reagan's government. Thanks to the arms given to them by our country (a supreme and bitter irony), The Taliban eventually won.

5. One more overt poster for the movie read: "How do you compete with a body that you have already surrendered to your opponent?"

6. While this idea that women can simply flip-flop between being gay and straight is total patriarchal mythology, I overlook it here if simply because the scenes between Hemingway and Moore are among my favorite in the film. In one long scene towards the middle of the movie, as Chris struggles with a knee injury, the two athletes meet at the pool and have an awkward, stirring interaction -- first under the water, and then in the weight room, where Chris benches the same weight as Kenny (thereby turning him on). Throughout the scene, She remains totally oblivious of the erotic power of her powerful, masculine body over the sweet but sort of dimwitted Kenny.

7. Actually, at 5'10 1/2, Hemingway is slightly taller than the average American male.

8. Hemingway's eyebrows are unfortunately no longer this way.

9. In her 1982 essay "Personal Best: Women in Love," distinguished film scholar Linda Williams criticized the portrayal of Chris and Tory's relationship as "hopelessly inadequate," describing it as no more than: "an emotional and sexual interlude in a larger configuration that cannot deal with its implications."

10. In a misguided move, Hemingway posed for Playboy magazine concurrent with the movie's release in 1982, reinforcing the anti feminist, anti transgressive sentiment associated with the film for many critics. She appears awkward and uncomfortable in the photographs.

11. Here Towne owes a grand debt to the 1965 documentary *Tokyo Olympiad* directed by Kon Ichikawa. In fact, a few scenes - such as a hurdle being hit making the only sound in the whole race - appear to be directly sourced from his one hundred and seventy minute film. It is an astoundingly beautiful documentary that is heavily borrowed from despite not being widely known.

12. The scene recalls for me Maurice Merleau-Ponty's 1945 opus, the *Phenomenology of Perception*. In it, Merleau-Ponty argues for an anti-Cartesian "primacy of perception." He believes that we encounter and understand our world through our bodies, not in spite of them, writing: "The body is our general medium for having a world."