

Personal Best (15)

Are audiences finally ready to embrace Robert Towne's controversial passion project?

Robert Towne's directorial debut *Personal Best* is a beautiful, rambling, thrilling, poetic concoction of a film. Variouslly described as a queer love story, sports drama, and coming-of-age film, it's all of these and more. It's also a film of contradictions and controversy. When first released in 1982 it was lauded as one of the first major Hollywood films to revolve around queer characters but simultaneously disappointed because of how its gay love story evolved; the slow-motion visuals of strong beautiful women were praised for their poetry and lyricism but also derided as the male gaze of its heterosexual director; and the film's naturalistic style and unhurried pace, while welcomed by some, undercut sports movie conventions to such an extent many left underwhelmed and unsatisfied.

Personal Best tells the story of college hurdler, Chris played by Mariel Hemingway who after failing to qualify in the 1976 Olympic trials begins a relationship with the more experienced pentathlete Tory played by Patrice Donnelly. They become lovers, Tory persuades her controlling coach Tingloff (Scott Glenn) to train Chris, and Tingloff changes Chris' event to pentathlon. Chris and Tory's relationship begins to flounder, Chris becomes involved with former Olympic swimmer Denny (Kenny Moore), and at the film's climax the two women compete against each other to qualify for the 1980 Olympic team.

A troubled production *Personal Best* was backed by the Geffen Company to the tune

of \$7 million but soon ran over schedule and budget. Towne and David Geffen clashed badly, there were reports of a chaotic set, and Towne was forced to sell the rights to his cherished screenplay *Greystoke* to keep the film alive. When *Personal Best* was finally released it recouped less than \$6 million against an estimated \$16 million cost. Deemed a train-wreck and financial disaster the film was abandoned by the studio and all but consigned to history. With all this chaos and Hollywood drama what possibly could have made it to the screen?

It turns out quite a lot. If audiences of the day couldn't assimilate *Personal Best* or were conflicted by different cinematic expectations, today's viewers have the benefit of forty years of hindsight. Most immediately striking is the extent to which Towne, a screenwriter making his debut as a director, uses visuals to tell the story. Not just images in the absence of dialogue but images organized into a language of visual poetry: slow-motion, close-ups, parts of bodies, bodies in motion, bodies under stress. These visuals are designed to make the character's personalities and sense of movement inseparable. Sequences such as the final 800-metre showdown, are masterly combinations of cutting, staging and camera work, and just under half-way through there's a longer than two-minute unbroken shot of Chris and Tory running up a sand dune that is simultaneously mesmerizing and a poetic encapsulation of the film's central theme.

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This boldness of style is matched by the narrative, firstly and most notably when the relationship between Chris and Tory becomes a same-sex romance. A year before *Lianna* (1983) and three years before *Desert Hearts* (1985) – which were both small independent productions not studio films - *Personal Best* was groundbreaking. This together with its casual approach to nudity and sex, including its naked steam room scenes and an episode where a curious Chris watches her partner urinate, shocked audiences. The narrative also takes a decidedly different approach to the sports film, with *Rocky*-style training montages and climatic showdowns replaced by the realities of full-time athletics: the fragility of performance; the tedium of constant training; the ongoing impact to the body; exhaustion, injury, rehabilitation. Obsessed with authenticity, Towne cast professional athletes in all the major roles except Hemingway and Glenn. When we see Patrice Donnelly, a real-life Olympic 100-metre hurdler, running it feels like she's gliding. Kenny Moore who plays Denny is a former Olympic marathoner who ran for the US team in 1968 and 1972.

This reality of time and place contributes to some of the more uncomfortable moments in the film. In an early scene one of the characters tells a jaw-droppingly racist joke, and later when a male coach affectionately pats a female athlete's behind after completing a challenging high jump, it's shocking by today's standards. The whole film feels like a time-capsule within a time-capsule. Beyond the period design, clothing, and hair styles, it has the free-wheeling maverick

spirit of a 1970s New Hollywood production.

Personal Best is most successful when viewed as a coming-of-age story. Mariel Hemingway's transformation from gawky, emotional teenager to mature, confident young woman is impressive and inspiring, and the nature of her physical, and emotional journey results in a film arguably more relevant today than when first released. Canadian novelist Fiona Duncan who lists *Personal Best* as one of her favourite films wrote a lengthy retrospective in 2023 calling it, "calmly bisexual in a way that only Gen Z may be as a cohort ready for," and last year *The Observer's* Guy Lodge included it as one of his *20 best sports movies* writing, "a commendably ahead-of-its-time study of sexual fluidity." Although it's unlikely *Personal Best* would be made today, we can find its influence in recent projects such as Luca Guadagnino's *Challengers* (2024), a film which seems to share much of its DNA. A popular success, Guadagnino's film found general audiences well-attuned to its sensibilities, something Towne's film never enjoyed. Maybe we're finally ready for *Personal Best*.

Unscreened for many years, it's a privilege to bring *Personal Best* back to audiences in partnership with the BFI. It's an imperfect film but one so creatively, intelligently, and passionately made it surely deserves renewed attention and reevaluation. I very much hope you enjoy it.

Geoffrey M. Badger
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LostReels.co.uk

Personal Best. USA 1982. Colour, 128 min. 35mm. Writer, producer, director: Robert Towne; Featuring: Mariel Hemingway, Patrice Donnelly, Scott Glenn, Kenny Moore; Cinematography: Michael Chapman; Music: Jack Nitzsche, Jill Fraser; Editing: Jacqueline Cambas, Jere Huggins, Ned Humphreys, Walt Mulconery, Bud S. Smith; Production Design: Ron Hobbs; Executive Producer: David Geffen. A Warner Brothers Release.

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