

'Personal Best' focuses on friends, competition

By David Thompson

Robert Towne did a very sensible thing when he wrote his film *Personal Best*. He knew that a lot of people would come to see the film merely to ooh and aah at the homosexual love scene that has been made so much of. He knew that a lot of people would be attracted by the hype, most notably the picture spread in *Playboy* magazine. He didn't want his picture to be wasted by being nothing more than a preamble to a love scene, however. So he placed the scene within the first half hour so that, hope-



Movie Review

fully, people could relax after that and listen to the real point of the picture.

That was a smart move because *Personal Best* is concerned with much more than any statements about homosexuality. The film has been touted as an icebreaker, like *Making Love*, because it is one of the first to deal with the issue. People will be tuned in, waiting to see what stand the film will take on the issues, waiting for the moral of the story. If they listen too hard they will miss the real focus of the film.

Personal Best is not so moralistic as to confine itself to an issue. It is not about issues or statements, but people athletes who are trying to juggle relationships with the constant reach for physical perfection. The film is about people who are trying to stretch their bodies to their limits despite all of the feelings inside them.

One of these people is Kris Cahill, played by Mariel Hemingway. She is a young runner, and her talent has caught the eye of an older, more mature runner, Tory Skinner, played by Patrice Donnelly. Tory's interest in Kris soon becomes more than athletic, and the love scene is tenderly rendered. A few gasps of surprise may rise from the audience, but that is to be expected. This is intimacy that is new to the screen. After this, Kris and Tory, as friends, lovers and athletes, set themselves to the task of qualifying for the Olympic team.

A conflict soon presents itself within Kris and the reasons for it are easy to understand. She sees in Tory different people. It is hard for her to keep straight in her mind which one she is dealing with. It is difficult to accept a person on the track as a competitor and then at home as a living companion. In one scene this becomes clear as Kris and Tory are facing each other on a weight machine. They stare into each other's eyes, standing close to one another, the same bodies that have made love in the past now challenging each other in a very different form of physical contact.

To understand that the film is about competition is to understand the necessity for the homosexuality. Had Kris and Tory been a man and woman, the conflict would not be as intense because men and women are not expected to compete athletically on an equal basis. Kris and Tory do

compete equally, however, challenging each other on equal terms in spite of the ultimate intimacy they have shared. This competition between friends and within themselves, this swirl of challenge and emotion, is the heart of the film.

Such an intriguing heart does not, however, mean that the extremities will not be flawed. Robert Towne's screenplay brings the love scene a little too early. When it arrives we have no particular reason to expect it aside from some flirty photography. And once they have become lovers, the dialogue occasionally degenerates into the same jealous bickering we hear from heterosexual couples.

This is not the only device Towne has resorted to. He doesn't hesitate to get a few cheap laughs out of that perennial favorite among slapstick fans, the fat athlete. He also couldn't resist the opportunity to compare the female athletes to their male counterparts. At one point the coach asks, "Do you really think that Chuck Noll has to worry that Terry Bradshaw is going to cry if Franco Harris won't talk to him?" This is consistent with the behavior of the hard edged coach, however, so we accept it. This coach, played by Scott Glenn who was last seen beating women in *Urban Cowboy*, eventually makes a move

on Kris, just like every other male in the picture. Towne said in an interview that "as a screenwriter you tend to identify with women more," so it's no surprise that he has neglected the men in his picture.

Michael Chapman's photography is outstanding in some parts and mediocre in others, as inconsistent as it was in *Raging Bull*, well done outdoors on the track but sometimes falling to the level of made-for-television movies when it steps inside. The movie is like that in many respects, at times hitting the high points, clearing the hurdles, and at other times falling smack onto the concrete. The high points make it worthwhile. At the end any questions on homosexuality are left cleverly unanswered. No pro or con leaps off the screen at you. If you were waiting for one the whole time the race was run, you missed a few interesting sights along the way.



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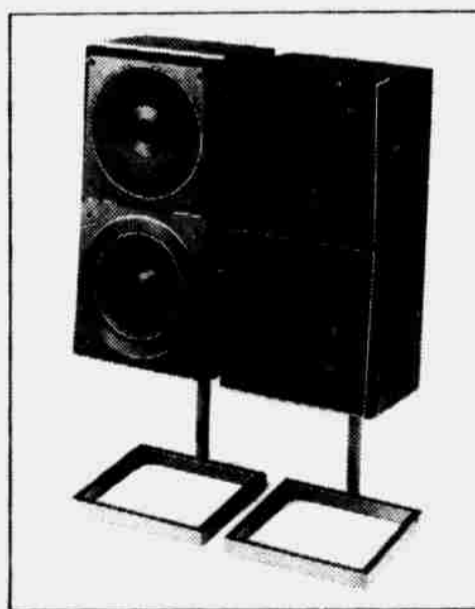
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