

Abstract - Defiant Embodiments in Theatre, Sport and Performance

'She Said She Likes Being Called a Diva, But Doesn't Always Understand It'¹ : Re-reading Images of the Female Gymnast Through the Figure of the Male Coach, and Back Again

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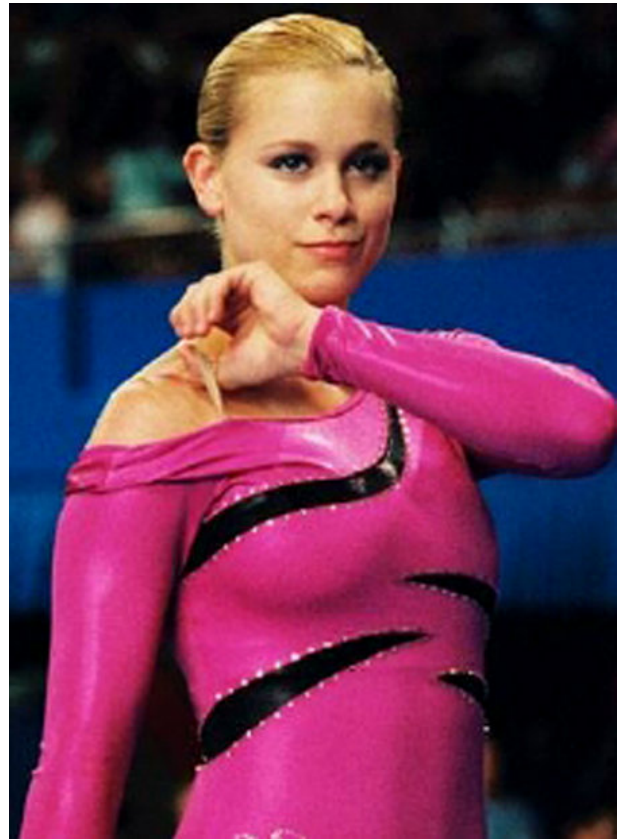
Women's Artistic Gymnastics, as an Olympic sport, is a subjectively-judged and aesthetic discipline, just one branch of gymnastics to have emerged out of a complex history and entanglements between dance, physical education, military drill, and medicinal exercise. The manner in which it is staged is highly performative: combined with deportment, elaborate leotards, make-up and hair styles, the equipment is installed in the arena on a raised podium, a stage-like setting for the various acts the successive rounds of apparatus instill. The male coach (and this role is male-dominated at an elite level) is often seen patrolling the sidelines as the female competitor performs, waiting to congratulate, appraise, or even reprimand her at the close.

During the Cold War when the winnings of Olympic gymnasts took on significant political clout, the new-found celebrity status of these competitors led to many male coaches switching over to the female discipline. With them, they brought increased acrobatic skills and a preference for an androgynous, pre-pubescent female form. Over time, this infiltrated the image in popular culture of the female gymnast: a child, submissive to a punishing training regimen, presided over by the paternalistic, demanding male coach. Images of the gymnast and coach through the 70s, 80s, and 90s heighten the discrepancies in their bodily dimensions and gender: for example, the coach's height as he towers over the petite gymnast.

With this in mind, Women's Artistic Gymnastics may appear to be an unlikely place to look for 'defiant embodiments.' The female gymnast/male coach relationship is however significantly more complex and nuanced than the aforementioned typical scenario and corresponding imagery. I propose to put forward alternative readings of this relationship and the figure of the female gymnast, focusing on acts of defiance, expressions of personal agency, and that of the gymnast-as-diva. My paper will draw upon visual culture, particularly broadcast coverage and cinema, including films such as 'Little Doll,' 1988, Mosfilm, directed by Isaak Fridberg and 'Stick It!', 2006, Touchstone Pictures, directed by Jessica Bendinger.

¹ NBC Commentator Tim Daggett, discussing Russian Olympic gymnast Svetlana Khorkina, at the 2000 Athens Olympic Summer Games.

Example Images



(L) Former American National Coach, and Coach to Romanian Olympian Bela Karolyi poses for a photography with 1996 American Olympic gymnast Dominique Moceanu. (R) Still showing a gymnast 'defiantly' reveal her bra straps in competition, for which a penalty can be deducted, in the 2006 Touchstone Pictures move 'Stick It!.'



Russian Gymnast Svetlana Khorkina with Former National Women's Team Coach Leonid Arkaev, as they share an Intimate Embrace, early 90s