

CHRONIQUE

CINEMA

CLOSING THE MUSCLE GAP: PUMPING IRON II: THE WOMEN

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Pumping Iron II: The Women is a timely film that alters both your consciousness as well as your actual standards of visual perception. Appearing shortly after the release of Susan Brownmiller's wonderful exploration of *Femininity*, it explores more by image than words the ever-changing notion of feminine physique and demeanor. The format and style of the film is rather awkward and contrived, due to the fact that it defines itself as a docudrama – a euphemism for pseudo-documentary – half natural and half scripted. But the message of the film is nevertheless loud and clear, and well worth viewing.

Pumping Iron II, as the name suggests, is a sort of sequel to *Pumping Iron I* (released in 1977), an excellent documentary on male body building featuring the now famous Arnold Schwarzenegger and Louis Ferrigno of Incredible Hulk fame. And while in many ways this earlier film is a better, more naturalistic documentary, *Pumping Iron II* handles a far more delicate and interesting issue – the changing standards of femininity; or put more simply, should girls have muscles and if so, how many?

As a person who has never been attracted to extreme forms of musculature in either men or women, this first film offered me a sympathetic view of the sport, the audiences and the contestants. The current film builds on this empathy and expands it to the fairer sex. In short, for people who have trouble relating to body building in general, i.e. male body building, they will certainly be doubly shocked to see such development on the female form. While it is common enough in our culture to focus on the female form as an object, we are more familiar with its passive, rather than aggressive, objectification.

In fact, one of the things I appreciated most about the film is its non-sensationalistic approach to the female body. There

is one silly shower scene which some people might find gratuitous, but overall one gets the distinct impression that the film makers are not into taking cheap shots, as well they might have. And while there is some sensuality here, to be sure, it is not the tacky sort of stuff that is usually so endemic to the mass media (no 20 minute workout panoramas here). In short, the film is genuinely about body building which, when you think about it in the context of our pervasively pornographic pop culture, is really quite amazing.

Pumping Iron II: The Women focuses on four major characters; it looks at them training, competing, and delves minimally into their personal lives. These four women demonstrate a range of female body types, thereby representing the ever evolving female standard. Sometimes the women talk quite explicitly about this, as do the judges and their trainers, and the film culminates in a contest which institutionalizes current standards – at least for the time being.

First, there is Rachel McLish, four-time champion who is gorgeous, sexy, muscular but thin by relative standards, and who presents herself in a seductive manner. (She is even reprimanded for wearing a swimsuit with padding). Rachel represents the status quo and is a crowd teaser (oops – pleaser). Then there is her disciple Lori Bower, a sweet young thing, more fully developed, whose main goal is to support her boyfriend so that he can leave his stripping career behind him. (A cute case of role reversal to be sure). Third is a gorgeous, sensual black woman named Carla Dunlap, who moves beautifully in and out of the water, has long flowing arms and is also fairly developed in the upper part of her body. She is also the brightest, most articulate of the four, and is the most sympathetic towards Rachel's nemesis – Bev Francis.

Bev is clearly the star of the film, as she represents the leading edge of female body building. An Australian powerlifter

turned body builder, her body is barely female, if at all. Her breasts have all but disappeared – all that is left are two semi-erect nipples that are more apparent than a male's. Most shocking, however, is her extraordinary neck and deltoid development. It is hard to describe in words how foreign such musculature is to the female body. And for those who do not like body building, even in men, it is this neck and deltoid area which is clearly most problematic. Neither is Bev very attractive, nor does she wear gobs of make-up as the other women do (to verify their femininity amidst the muscles?). But as the movie evolves, Bev proves to be a very likable character, just as Rachel becomes increasingly offensive.

Unfortunately, however, Bev's masculinity is more than muscle deep. Although graceful, she lacks the free-flowing, choreographed movements of the other women. While one may not be especially enamored of Rachel's overly seductive gyrations, Bev is scarcely sexual at all. Rather, she resembles too closely men's body building demeanor which, she herself says, is boring. In fact, it is on this very point in the film that Bev endears herself to us. Among friends in her hotel room, she performs the most unbelievably funny pantomime which satirizes men's body building. Bev brilliantly produces pose after boring pose with little commentary, poking non-verbal fun at men's lack of grace and creativity. Unfortunately, however, although she is quite graceful, her own routine is similarly unimaginative and distinctly unsensual. Yes, she is powerful, performing to the tune of Star Wars, but is power enough? If women do not bring something distinctly "female" (not *feminine*) to body building is there any point? Or is it merely about doing what men do?

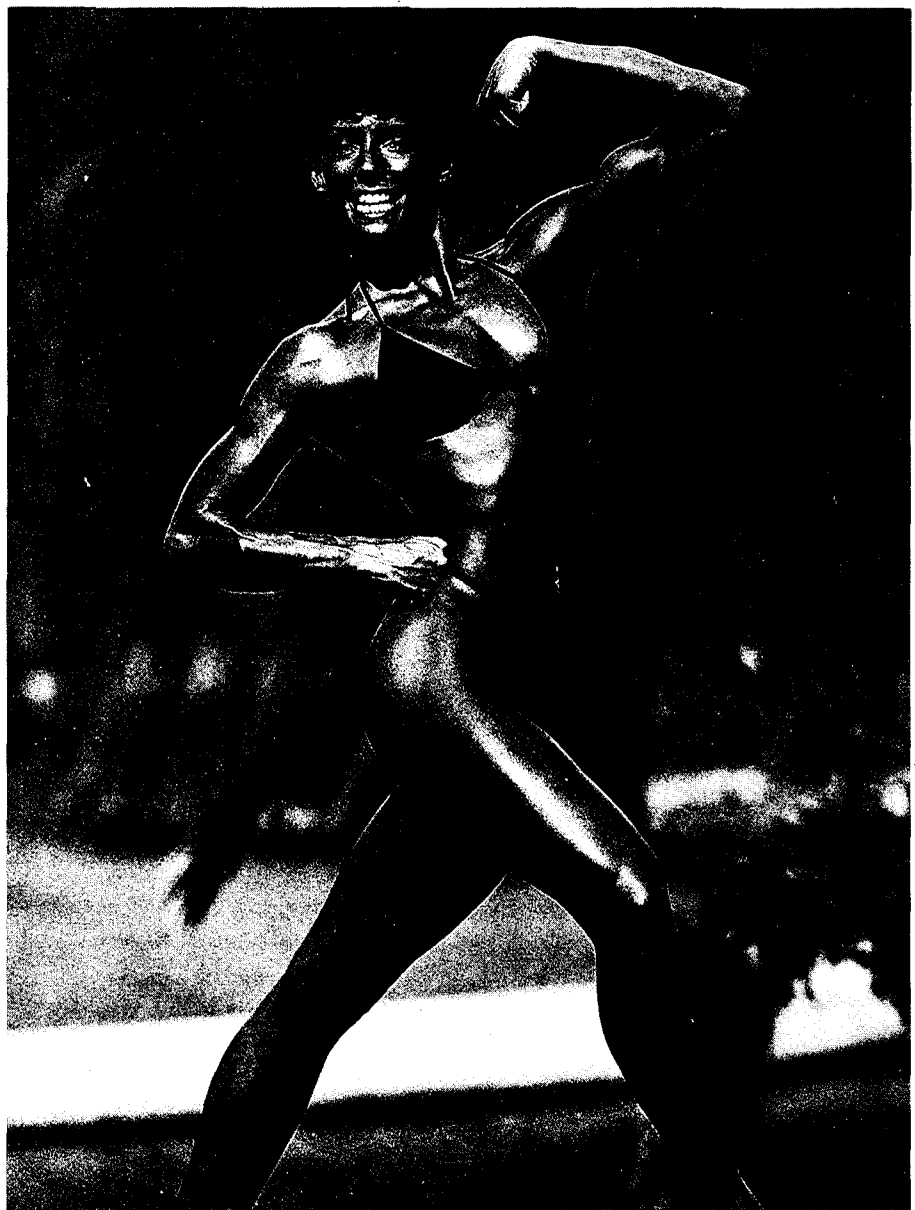
As both the film and the competition evolve it becomes increasingly evident that the race between good and evil is between Rachel (status quo) and Bev

Frances (wonderwoman). And, similarly, the movie audience who is at first quite shocked by Frances, becomes increasingly taken with her and all that she represents. Neither is there any question as to the fans' bias. But the judges are a lot more ambivalent, as the final results ultimately reveal. In the end, however, it is neither Rachel nor Bev who win but rather Carla, who represents something of a compromise.

While Bev may be too much for us, Carla is not, and so the more traditional form of Rachel becomes a piece of social history. In this regard, I cannot help but add a personal note here about my own changing visual perception of Rachel. In the beginning of the film, she is clearly the most attractive form (for me) even though some of the aficionados call her a "bag of bones." Yet as the film evolves, I found myself perceiving her as a "little too thin" and underdeveloped. This is precisely how the movie, and the mass media in general, move our standards of visual perception. The process is so striking that I can only wonder not *if*, but *when* I will fully accept the figure of Bev Frances.

In point of fact, I happen to believe that Carla's triumph attests to the fact that women do bring something different to the sport. In fact, wouldn't it be nice to see male body building become more sensualized and gracefully choreographed as a result? Yet one should not diminish the importance of Bev Frances' frame on the stage. Her very existence, even if her form is never adopted as the ideal, helps to shift our visual boundaries of what is acceptably female. In short, it is the old story of the extremes at the end of the continuum, the leading edge so to speak, making it possible for more gradual change inside the establishment. The aficionados are already there – it is only the general public and judges who lag behind.

There are a number of other questions that I cannot help but raise in relation to the film, although I can barely begin to answer them. The first is, what is the relationship of body building to beauty pageants? Is one better than the other or less narcissistic? Certainly the pageant is more passive, yet body building does not focus on sport itself but on a sports-like body. In a way it, too, is superficial. Secondly, will increased female development merely spur the males on to greater and greater deltoid development so that we can still tell the pinks from the blues? Is it like a sort of physical fitness Star Wars? And what about all this power on



American bodybuilder Penny Price

Credit: Tony Duffy/All-Sport

women? Can one argue that it *really* is less appropriate on a woman? For one thing, a woman's body has a higher fat to muscle ratio, so to build it up like a male's is to distort it to a greater degree. On the other hand, all body building is so distorted by definition that this difference seems rather insignificant. But finally (and more importantly), do we as women, as feminists, really want to get caught up in the 'bigger is better' game? Yet, I do get a rush when I see muscular women parade on the stage and I identify with their power (the fact that many of them are lipsticked to death and have infantilized voices is totally incidental). But a rush is not enough. We do have to consider whether this is just a perverse form of *machismo*, paralleling some of the worst aspects of patriarchal culture. On the other hand, when you overhear the judges in the film talking ab-

out standards of "femininity," you want to wring their necks and help Bev Frances to develop hers further! Obviously, the film is good for a multitude of reflections, and I am just as ambivalent as anyone.

Finally, even as I say I am not especially fond of Bev Frances' body and I too have some discomfort with her lack of "femaleness," I am embarrassingly aware of my own prejudices and the fact that, as things progress, I could easily change my mind. I cannot rid myself of the notion that, if gender differences are about power, nothing could be more effectively symbolic of closing the gender gap than seeing a woman who is just as muscular as a man. Like it or not, Bev Frances pushes the gender gap button in a very visceral way: this is why the film is so disturbing and potentially controversial – or at least should be.