

Seattle University

ScholarWorks @ SeattleU

---

The Spectator Online

Newspapers

---

5-1-2024

## 2024-05-01 How “Challengers” Paints Tennis as Sex, Sex as Power [REVIEW & SPOILERS]

Chloe Platt  
*Seattle University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/spectator-online>

---

### Recommended Citation

Platt, Chloe, "2024-05-01 How “Challengers” Paints Tennis as Sex, Sex as Power [REVIEW & SPOILERS]" (2024). *The Spectator Online*. 1275.  
<https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/spectator-online/1275>

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Newspapers at ScholarWorks @ SeattleU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Spectator Online by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ SeattleU.



The Spectator • May 1, 2024 • <https://seattlespectator.com/2024/05/01/how-challengers-paints-tennis-as-sex-sex-as-power-review-spoilers/>

# How “Challengers” Paints Tennis as Sex, Sex as Power [REVIEW & SPOILERS]

Chloe Platt, Editor-in-Chief

While the trailer promised a sleekly sexual component to the portrayal of a competition-fueled love triangle, “Challengers” is not about the tennis bourgeoisie or the dripping eroticism of a jealous kiss. “Challengers” is a film about power.

The film centers on the tumultuously sensuous relationship between Art Donaldson (Mike Faist), Patrick Zweig (Josh O’Connor) and Tashi Duncan (Zendaya). The three first met in 2006, where Art and Patrick won a doubles match at the Junior Open, choosing to celebrate by watching a match played by young tennis prodigy, Tashi Duncan.

In the heat of this match we are introduced to the innate sexuality of tennis; of giving in to the profound vulnerability of testing the physical limits of your opponent, letting them test the boundaries of your own ability. For Luca Guadagnino, the director of “Challengers,” tennis is so little a sport and so largely a passionate push-and-pull of dominance and submission.

Later that same evening, Art and Patrick invite Tashi back to their hotel room, both boys sweaty and victim to the awkward tension their mutual infatuation creates. The three end up indulging in one another, Tashi breaking away before either boy is satisfied.

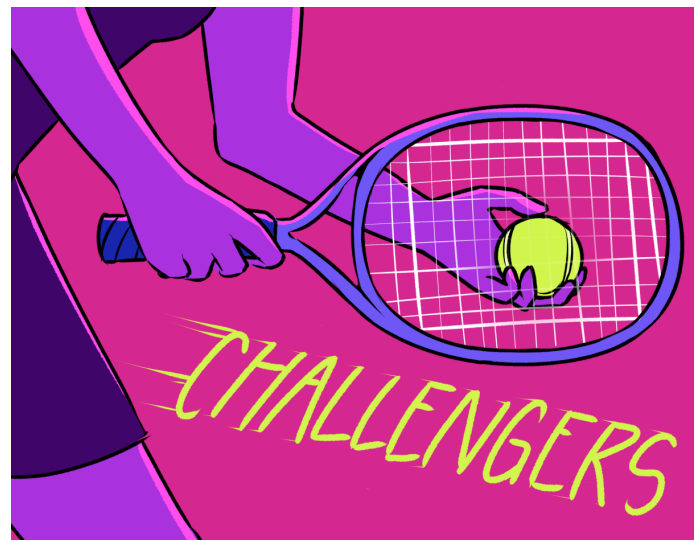
It is here that we see the raw beginning of the boys’ obsession with Tashi. And it is here that Tashi realizes it as well. Every twitch of her body catalyzes a reaction from Art and Patrick; the subtle angling of a shoulder becomes a calculated power-play. A twisted yet intense sexual dynamic. A match-opening flat serve.

From their steamy encounter, Patrick and Tashi begin a short-lived relationship, ending when Tashi experiences a career-ending injury and Art is the one to comfort her.

Art’s opportunism is the foundation for their future relationship, and the breaking of his and Patrick’s.

13 years later, Art and Tashi are a tennis power-couple, with Tashi coaching Art through a lackluster, injury-shortened season. Tashi enters Art as a wildcard in a challenger event, where the married couple run into a now lower-level tournament playing Patrick.

Tashi’s strict control over Art’s tennis career is apparent, but her control over Art’s emotions is even more vicious. He is punished



Annabelle DeGuzman-Carino

for each poorly-played tournament, Tashi's disposition growing distant with every loss. Art is not the victim in this marriage, however, and Tashi is not the villain; both are consumed by a desire for possession. Art craves to own Tashi's affections: Tashi craves to own Art's success.

Patrick and Art start at different ends of the seeding, but compete against each other in the final match. The night before, Patrick asks Tashi to be his coach, to which she angrily declines. Later that evening, in their hotel room, Art asks Tashi to love him even if he loses the final match, but she announces that she will leave him if he does not win.

After Art is asleep, Tashi sneaks out of the hotel and into Patrick's car, where she asks him to let Art win the final match. The two then have sex in the back of Patrick's car.

While Tashi holds herself to a higher regard than the one with which she considers Patrick, their adulterous night presents them as mirrors of one another. Tashi high off the thrill of Patrick's vibrant sexuality, Patrick drunk on the depth of hers. They are both chasing visceral sensations, both giving in to their innate desire to feel power through the exploration of sexual intimacy.

At the match the next day, electric volleys ensue, the height of both's performances rattling Tashi in the stands. In a moment of pure intensity, Patrick signals to Art that he and Tashi slept together the night before. With Art's anger visible in his playing, he wins the match, his final hit ending with him jumping over the net and into Patrick's arms while an impassioned Tashi cheers from the stands.

It is here where it becomes clear that, for Tashi, her love was never for Art or Patrick, her love was for tennis, for winning, for power. As Tashi says in the early minutes of the film, "tennis is a relationship." Art and Patrick were only ever players in her court. And both boys played the game willingly.

"Challengers" is teeming with the intense, throbbing sexuality omnipresent in Guadagnino's films. A master of tending to relational complexities, Guadagnino highlights the dark and obsessive push and pull of human sexuality, human interaction, human nature.

"Challengers" uses tennis as a backdrop to explore the vulnerability of lust. Tennis as sex, sex as power.