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Challengers (film)

Challengers is a 2024 American romantic sports drama film directed by Luca Guadagnino from a screenplay by Justin Kuritzkes, and stars Zendaya, Josh O'Connor, and Mike Faist. In the film, struggling former tennis champion Art Donaldson (Faist) plots a comeback with the help of his wife and coach Tashi Duncan (Zendaya), and finds himself facing off against Patrick Zweig (O'Connor), his former best friend and Tashi's ex-boyfriend.

Kuritzkes' screenplay was acquired in February 2022, with Guadagnino and the main cast hired shortly thereafter: the leads trained for months with former tennis player and coach Brad Gilbert to prepare for their roles. Principal photography began that May and lasted until that June, with filming primarily taking place in Boston. Sayombhu Mukdeeprom, who previously worked with Guadagnino on *Call Me by Your Name* (2017) and *Suspiria* (2018), served as cinematographer.

Delayed from an initial September 2023 release in response to the actors' strike, *Challengers* premiered in Sydney on March 26, 2024, and was theatrically released in the United States by Amazon MGM Studios one month later. The film received positive reviews from critics and has grossed over \$79 million worldwide.

Plot

In 2006, high schoolers and childhood best friends Patrick Zweig and Art Donaldson win the boys' junior doubles title at the US Open. Afterward, they meet Tashi Duncan, a highly lauded young tennis prospect to whom Patrick and Art are both attracted. The three meet in a hotel room, where eventually, the two boys kiss both Tashi and each other, but Tashi ends the tryst before it escalates to sex. With Patrick and Art playing each other in the junior singles final the next day, Tashi says she will give her phone number to whoever wins. Patrick wins the match, and later signals to Art that he had sex with Tashi by placing the ball in the neck of his racket prior to serving, a tic of Art's.

Tashi and Art go on to play college tennis at Stanford University, while Patrick turns professional and begins a long-distance relationship with Tashi while on tour. Art privately suggests to Tashi that Patrick does not actually love her. When Patrick visits Stanford, Art similarly suggests to him that Tashi does not take the

<i>Challengers</i>	
	
Theatrical release poster	
Directed by	<u>Luca Guadagnino</u>
Written by	<u>Justin Kuritzkes</u>
Produced by	<u>Amy Pascal</u> <div><u>Luca Guadagnino</u></div> <div><u>Zendaya</u></div> <div><u>Rachel O'Connor</u></div>
Starring	<u>Zendaya</u> <div><u>Josh O'Connor</u></div> <div><u>Mike Faist</u></div>
Cinematography	<u>Sayombhu Mukdeeprom</u>
Edited by	<u>Marco Costa</u>
Music by	<u>Trent Reznor</u> <div><u>Atticus Ross</u></div>
Production companies	<u>Metro-</u> <div><u>Goldwyn-Mayer</u></div>

relationship seriously. Patrick sees that Art is jealous, and playfully teases him for trying to disrupt his relationship with Tashi. Later, Patrick and Tashi fight when she gives him unsolicited tennis advice during sex and he says he views her as a peer, not his coach. In the match shortly afterward, which Patrick skips due to the fight, Tashi suffers a severe knee injury. Patrick returns to comfort Tashi, but she furiously demands he leave, with Art taking her side. Art aids Tashi in her recovery, but she is unsuccessful in resuming her tennis career.

In 2009, Tashi reconnects with Art and becomes his coach, with the two beginning a romantic relationship. He reveals that he and Patrick have not spoken since Tashi's injury. In 2011, Tashi and Art are now engaged, and Art's career is on the rise. Tashi and Patrick run into each other at the Atlanta Open and have a one-night stand, which Art secretly notices.

In 2019, now married, Tashi and Art are a wealthy power couple with a young daughter, Lily. Under Tashi's coaching, Art has become a top professional tennis player. He is one US Open title away from a Career Grand Slam, though he has been struggling after recovering from an injury. Tashi enters Art as a wild card in a Challenger event in New Rochelle, New York, in the hope he can boost his confidence and return to form by beating lower-level opponents. Patrick, despite coming from an affluent family, is now an unknown player living out of his car, scraping by on winnings from the lower circuits, and happens to also enter the New Rochelle event.

Starting at opposite ends of the seeding, Art and Patrick advance through the brackets until they find themselves facing each other in the final. The day before the match, Patrick attempts to reconnect with Art, but Art rejects Patrick, saying that his career is over and Art will be remembered in tennis history.

Sensing that Tashi is unhappy with Art and that Art is tired of playing, Patrick secretly asks Tashi to coach him to one last winning season, but she declines. The night before the final, Art informs Tashi he plans to retire at the end of the season whether he wins the Open or not. She half-heartedly claims she accepts him quitting, but Art refuses to believe this. To motivate him, Tashi tells Art that if he loses to Patrick, she will leave him. Afterward, Tashi secretly meets with Patrick to ask him to throw the match to Art. Patrick reluctantly agrees. The two then have sex inside his car. When Tashi returns, Art is sleeping in their daughter's room, indicating that he knows Tashi snuck out.

The day of the final, Tashi watches from the crowd as Art and Patrick are matched. Patrick wins the first set, and Art wins the second. As Art takes the lead late in the final game, Patrick begins to throw the match through double faults. However, he stops short of losing and instead signals that he had slept with Tashi using Art's serve tic. Stunned, Art allows Patrick to score until they are again tied.

	Why Are You Acting? Frenesy Film Company <u>Pascal Pictures</u>
Distributed by	<u>Amazon MGM Studios</u> (United States) <u>Warner Bros. Pictures</u> (international)
Release dates	March 26, 2024 (Sydney) April 26, 2024 (United States)
Running time	131 minutes ^[1]
Country	United States
Language	English
Budget	\$55 million ^[2]
Box office	\$79.5 million ^{[3][4]}

During the tie break, Art and Patrick furiously trade turns. The rally intensifies until both jump for a volley at the net. As Art begins to slam the ball, he collides with Patrick over the net and the two embrace tightly, while Tashi erupts from the stands, thrilled.^[5]

Cast

- Zendaya as Tashi Duncan^[6]
- Josh O'Connor as Patrick Zweig^[6]
- Mike Faist as Art Donaldson^[6]
- Darnell Appling as New Rochelle Final Umpire^[7]
- Shane Harris as Art's security guard
- Nada Despotovich as Tashi's mother
- AJ Lister as Lily Donaldson
- Naheem Garcia as Tashi's father
- Jake Jensen as Finn Larsen^[8]
- Hailey Gates as Helen

Production

Development

Kuritzkes was inspired to make a tennis movie after watching the 2018 U.S. Open match between Serena Williams and Naomi Osaka, in which Williams was penalized for receiving coaching from the sidelines. He had never heard of the rule and thought the fact that the player could not talk with such an important figure during the match seemed cinematic. "What if you really had to talk about something important that went beyond tennis? Something going on with you personally?" he noted. While doing research for the script, he read Andre Agassi's memoir *Open*, in it Agassi recounts how then coach, Brad Gilbert, entered him at a Challenger event in Nevada. This served as inspiration for Art's arc in the film.^[9] He also knew what the characters' origins were while writing, "Tashi was always a Black woman. Patrick was always a very well-to-do Jewish guy, and Art was always a somewhat well-to-do WASP." Kuritzkes thought that with the story being centered about tennis, it would be weird if one of the characters was not Black, "Because that is the story of American women's tennis, if you look at all of the big superstars from the past decade."^[10] The script landed on The Black List, the annual list of the best unproduced scripts in Hollywood, in December 2021.^[11] That same year producer partners Amy Pascal and Rachel O'Connor, read the script. Pascal had been wanting to work with Luca Guadagnino for a long time, and sent him the script while he was filming the short film *O Night Divine*, starring John C. Reilly. "I had the script on set, hiding myself from John C., not showing him that I was reading while I was directing. Anyway, I found it amazing." Guadagnino recalled.^[10] In a 2022 interview with *Collider*, Guadagnino cited Kuritzkes' screenplay, Amy Pascal, and Zendaya as inspirations for making the film.^[12] Kuritzkes modified the script to add a scene where Patrick and Art end up kissing each other, at the behest of Guadagnino. "Luca felt it was very important that, in any love triangle, all the corners touch, and I quickly realized he meant it literally."^[10]

In early 2022, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's then chairman Kevin Ulrich, met with Guadagnino to discuss distributing the independently financed *Bones and All*. During the meeting Guadagnino also told him he was in the midst of developing a "sexy tennis story starring Zendaya". Ulrich contacted Michael De Luca and Pamela Abdy — then the heads of MGM — and over the next 24 hours, they negotiated a two-picture

deal, picking up both movies. When Amazon completed its acquisition of the studio, the latter inherited the titles, and Zendaya landed a \$10 million paycheck as star and producer.^[10] In February 2022, the film was announced with Zendaya, Josh O'Connor and Mike Faist set to star.^[13]

Casting

Pascal's first choice to play Tashi was Zendaya, which she knew from working with her on several Spider-man films, and passed her the script. Zendaya accepted the role, as it would be a departure from the teenagers she was used to portraying, and felt it was the right time to move into more adult roles, saying "It was nice to play a character that was not a child anymore. It was also interesting playing parts of my life that I haven't experienced yet: I've not gotten married. I've not had a child. Those milestones, I don't necessarily have a direct reference point for."^[10]

Guadagnino suggested Josh O'Connor should play the cocky Patrick. For the role of Art, Guadagnino considered West Side Story (2021) actors Mike Faist and his co-star David Alvarez. Faist, wasn't interested at first, but his agent insisted he read the script. Faist was asked to travel to London to do a test screen with Zendaya. "I thought, 'Why not? If I don't get the job, I got a trip out of it.'" he recalled. Faist thought that the audition had gone badly, but Guadagnino loved his interpretation. He said that Guadagnino's main preoccupations were that he was blond and that his body should be hairless. Faist was put off by the idea of shaving, but Guadagnino felt that as an athlete, he needed to be "aerodynamic".^[10]

Zendaya's best friend and personal assistant Darnell Appling, portrayed the Umpire at the New Rochelle Final. Guadagnino wanted him to sit on the umpire chair during a camera test, Appling thought he would just be acting as a stand-in, as he had done previously in other Zendaya projects. Guadagnino asked him to play the part, which with Zendaya's blessing, he accepted. To prepare for the role, Guadagnino asked Appling to attend Umpire school. Appling spent three weeks filming.^{[7][14]}

Filming

Principal photography began on May 3, 2022, in Boston, where a casting call took place for local residents to audition to play tennis players, general extras, and stand-ins.^[15] In preparation for their roles, Zendaya, Faist, and O'Connor spent three months training with pro-tennis player-turned-coach Brad Gilbert.^{[16][10]} Faist, who had just finished filming *West Side Story*, had to gain 30 pounds for the film, "Mike had to eat between 8,000 to 10,000 calories a day because they wanted him to gain weight, he was super thin. He had to work on his tennis and gain like 30 pounds. I had Zendaya in Los Angeles, so we got her on a program right away, and Josh was working, so [Faist] had the latest start." Gilbert, who was also a consultant on the film, said. During training the actors started at 6 a.m., they were on the tennis center until noon, and then would act on the afternoon.^[17] Filming occurred in and around the Back Bay and East Boston neighborhoods.^[18] Sayombhu Mukdeeprom served as cinematographer.^[19] Jonathan Anderson, creative director of Spanish luxury brand Loewe, served as costume designer.^[20] Filming wrapped on June 26, 2022.^[21]

Post-production

Guadagnino visited Zendaya on the set of *Dune: Part Two* in order to complete ADR for *Challengers*.^[22] Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross composed the film's score, having previously worked with Guadagnino on 2022's *Bones and All*.^[23] Post-production was completed by April 2023.^[24]

Music

The film's original score was composed by Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross. A remixed version was released in collaboration with Boys Noize.^[25]

Release

The film was previously set to be released on September 15, 2023,^[26] and before that August 11, 2023.^[27] The film was also scheduled to have its world premiere as the opening film of the 80th Venice International Film Festival,^[28] but was delayed and pulled out from the festival by Amazon MGM Studios due to the 2023 SAG-AFTRA strike at the time.^[29]

Challengers premiered in Sydney, Australia on March 26, 2024, followed by premieres in Paris, London and at the Westwood Village Theater in Los Angeles, the latter of which had tennis player Venus Williams in attendance.^[30]

Theatrical

It was released in theaters and IMAX in the United States and Canada by Amazon MGM Studios on April 26, 2024, the same month as the centennial anniversary of the founding of MGM on April 17.^{[31][29][32][33][34]}

Warner Bros. Pictures serves as the film's international distributor.^[35] Although the film was initially set for a direct-to-streaming release on Amazon Prime Video in France instead of a theatrical release, the decision was reversed in January 2024, meaning the film would start streaming on the service 17 months after its initial theatrical release. The film was released there on April 24, 2024, two days before its release in the United States, although a spokesperson for Warner Bros. Discovery initially denied this, stating the film had not been dated for a French theatrical release yet.^{[36][37][4]}

Home media

The film was made available on rental PVD on May 17, 2024.^[38]

Reception

Box office

As of May 21, 2024, *Challengers* has grossed \$44.4 million in the United States and Canada and \$35.1 million in other territories, for a worldwide total of \$79.5 million.^{[4][3]}

In the United States and Canada, *Challengers* was released alongside *Boy Kills World* and *Unsung Hero*, and was projected to gross \$12–15 million from 3,477 theaters in its opening weekend.^{[39][2]} The film made \$6.2 million on its first day, including \$1.9 million in Thursday night previews.^[40] It went on to debut

to \$15 million, topping the box office and marking the best domestic opening weekend of Guadagnino's career and of Zendaya's for a non-IP film.^[41] In its second weekend the film made \$7.9 million (a drop of 49%), finishing second behind newcomer *The Fall Guy* and the re-release of *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*.^[42]

Critical response

On the review aggregator website *Rotten Tomatoes*, 88% of 319 critics' reviews are positive, with an average rating of 8/10. The website's consensus reads: "With its trio of outstanding performers volleying their star power back and forth without ever dropping the ball, *Challengers* is a kinetic and sexy romp at court."^[43] *Metacritic*, which uses a weighted average, assigned the film a score of 82 out of 100, based on 62 critics, indicating "universal acclaim".^[44] Audiences polled by *CinemaScore* gave the film an average grade of "B+" on an A+ to F scale, while those polled by *PostTrak* gave it a 77% overall positive score, with 59% saying they would definitely recommend it.^[41]

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External links

- [Official website \(https://www.mgm.com/movies/challengers-2023\)](https://www.mgm.com/movies/challengers-2023)
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