



JOHNNY WEIR

THE ART OF SHOWMANSHIP

by EDWARD Z. EPSTEIN

"I love Johnny Weir!" exclaimed leading fashionista Rachel Zoe, a sentiment echoed by Johnny's iconic friend Lady Gaga and many others in and out of the skating world.

While he "dares to be different," he has in fact achieved a higher goal: he dares to be himself, and does not take his success for granted. "I enjoy every second of my day, I realize how lucky I am, how fortunate. The sheer outpouring of love from audiences is thrilling. Many are afraid of success — I'm afraid of sharks and spiders."

Like Sonja Henie, the groundbreaker in the art of showmanship-on-ice (she introduced, among other elements, balletic moves, short skirts and a distinctive personality into competitive skating),

Weir is of Norwegian descent. Unlike Sonja, and most other skating champions, Weir was a very late starter on the ice. By the age of twelve, when he began, most serious competitors are already veterans. A rural Pennsylvanian, he started out self-taught, experimenting on the frozen Amish-country cornfields behind his home. His skates were old and worn out, but out there on the ice, it was magical. Horseback riding was another passion; a choice had to be made: skating had won his heart.

A skating career was a very costly undertaking — not only in dollars but in emotional commitment — and would require great family sacrifice. The Weirs forged ahead, Johnny's fearlessness, determination and dedication invaluable

natural assets. Within four years, at age sixteen, he won gold at the 2001 World Junior championships.

His sense of showmanship was anything but an asset in the formal and conservative world of competitive figure skating. Razzle-dazzle, "being different," was not a point-worthy element on a judge's computer; generating any kind of controversy was a skater's *bête noir*. Restraining his artistic sensibilities to conform to the stringent rules and regulations was highly stressful; over the years there were crises-of-confidence. Renowned coach Priscilla Hill was instrumental in his development; final results, more often than not, were rewarding and worth the effort.

"I saw that he had something unique



right from the beginning, and I told him so," states legendary former two-time World champion — and a master of the art-of-showmanship herself — Aja Zanova Steindler (2005 Ice Theatre honoree). "I first met Johnny when he'd been invited to skate by the Harlem Skating Club at Central Park's Wollman Rink." (Aja was "looking after the rink" for her friend Donald Trump, who'd revitalized the venue.) "Johnny was unknown at that point. But after he skated, I went over to him and told him: 'You've got a big future. But you've got to work hard.' I loved his style — strong, elegant, dramatic. He had the potential to become a great artist."

Johnny persevered, achieving an enviable competitive record: in 2004, at the age of twenty, he became U.S. national champion. He retained the title

in 2005 and 2006 — few have won three consecutive National titles — earning a spot on the '06 U.S. Olympic team. At the Games that year, in Torino, Italy, he achieved second place in the short program, finishing fifth overall. The media adored him — "he delivers the best quotes!" — and he was described as "edgy, elegant and unpredictable." His impact and style were likened by some as "a combination of Toller Cranston, John Curry and Judy Garland." His costumes — "What's he going to wear?" — kept reporters, and the public, intrigued. Hurtful comments — "I know some called me 'Johnny Wierdo,'" he laughs today — came with the territory. "My family kept me grounded," he says. "Ultimately, I'm a small-town kid."

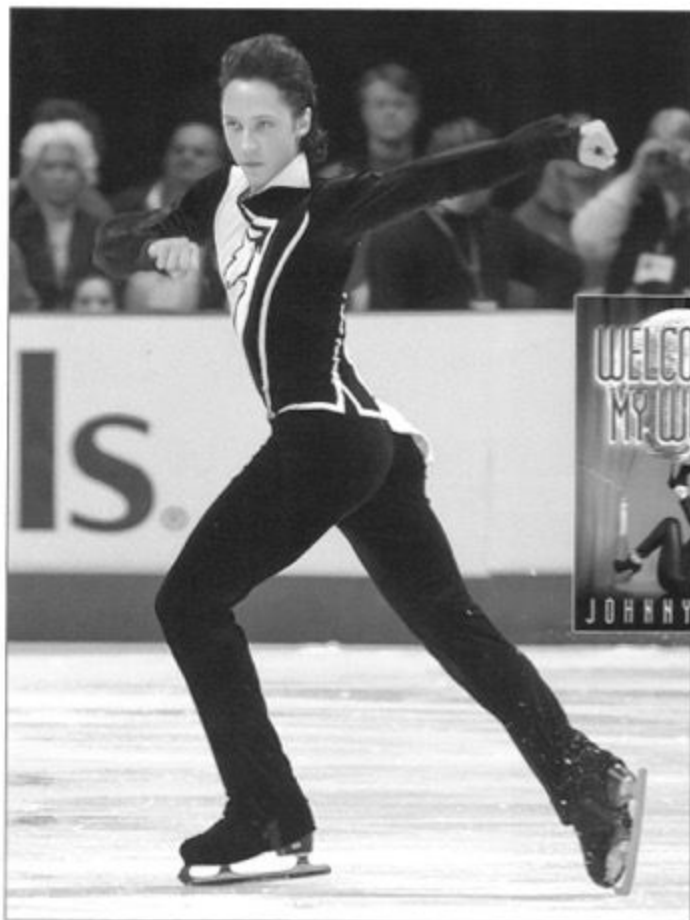
At the 2008 Worlds he won bronze — Team USA won no other medals at

that competition — and was voted US Figure Skating's Readers Choice Award for Skater of the Year (The Michelle Kwan Trophy). He won the award for a second time in 2010, the only skater other than Kwan to do so.

In 2010, at age twenty-six, he competed in his second Olympics, in Vancouver. (He's contemplating competing in the 2014 Games; "I like to keep my options open," he says.)

Which contemporary skater does Weir admire? "Evgeny Plushenko. I think he's the ultimate competitor. I'm not a competitor that way — he'll fight ferociously to win. He was always very nice to me, friendly, kind. I appreciated that, and won't ever forget it."

Johnny was the right personality, in the right place, at the right time, for his subsequent emergence into the big-time



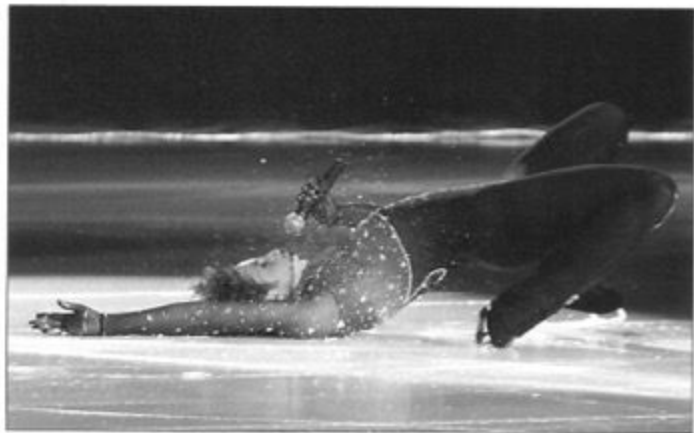
showbiz spotlight: he didn't do it alone. Of crucial importance was his good fortune in connecting with the right person, Tara Modlin, to manage and help shape his career.

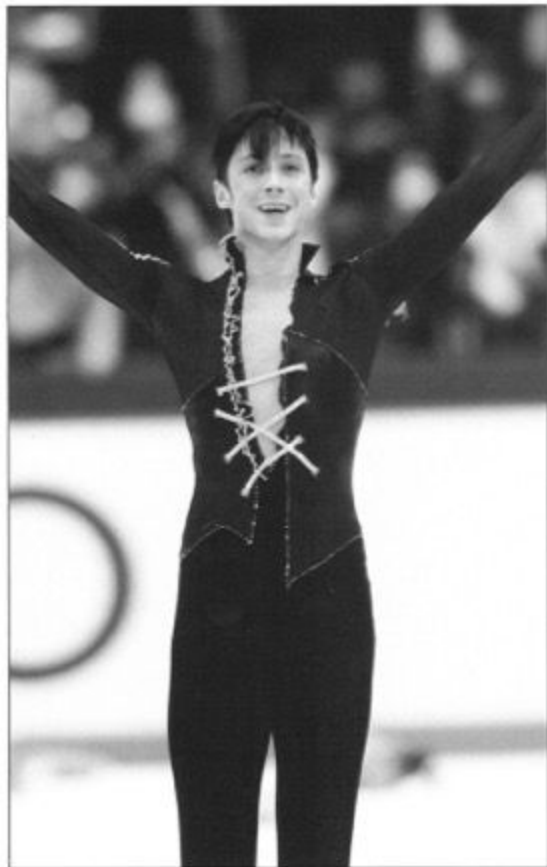
How did Tara and Johnny meet? "My grandmother, a big fan of figure skating, actually brought us together," recalls Tara. "I was a producer of an event at which Johnny was one of the skaters. At a get-together afterwards, my grandmother — who was gorgeous, on the inside as well as the outside, always impeccably dressed, make-up, hair perfect, she was a former debutante — there she was, deep in conversation with Johnny. They were seated at a table in a back corner of the room. It was a mutual admiration society between Johnny and grandmother; they appreciated each other's sense of style and beauty! That was the start of our beautiful relationship."

It remains a special relationship — Tara and Johnny are genuine, close friends. "You have to be, you have to really care about the person whose career you're managing for everything to fall into place." Both share the same work ethic: "We're in love with our work, and I'd sum up Johnny's success with two words: hard work. He's a worker, I'm a worker, and we've been very fortunate."

Johnny has proven successful with many endeavors off-the-ice: his TV reality series, "Be Good Johnny Weir," on the Logo Network, won the 2010 NewNowNext Award for Most Addictive Reality Star. He's written an autobiography for Simon & Schuster, "Welcome To My World," and has recorded his first single, "Dirty Love," a hot seller on iTunes. He's even established a clothing line, and does not dismiss the notion that he might enter the movie and television acting arena ("I've already gone on a few auditions," he notes).

The Human Rights Campaign—Seattle recently honored Johnny with the HRC Visibility Award, which is given to individuals "who are living open and honest lives." HRC spokesman Dr. Marty Lieberman noted: "Johnny has given courage to all the little boys and girls out





there who want to pursue their dreams." It was not a surprise when Johnny was selected as Grand Marshall of the 2011 Los Angeles PRIDE Parade, a source of enormous pride to Johnny.

Regarding his status as a pop-culture icon — on occasion referring to himself in the third person — "I'm kidding when I do that," he states emphatically. "It's a joke!"

While skating has been the launch pad for a marvelous career, Johnny doesn't envision himself performing on ice indefinitely. Where does he see himself in ten years? "Happy, I hope!" he laughs.

How does he feel about ITNY? "I'm so excited to be honored by Ice Theatre because I've admired their commitment to the art and sport of figure skating for as long as I can remember. I'm also thrilled to have another opportunity to perform at my home base, New York City."

Johnny retains an unspoiled spirit, a sense of humor and wonder at all he has achieved thus far. "We're delighted Johnny is our honoree this year," states ITNY founder Moira North. "The joy and release of his work have enabled him to retain a fundamental simplicity, an honesty; and he's remained excitingly unpredictable, the true signature of a genuine artist."

Congratulations, Johnny Weir!

Edward Z. Epstein (edwardzeinstein.com), author and playwright, has written a number of books — his subjects have included Lucille Ball, Lana Turner, Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward, Mia Farrow and Michelle Kwan (*Born to Skate: The Michelle Kwan Story*, published by Ballantine). A dedicated figure skater, a former Middle Atlantic States Novice champion, he organized a festival of Sonja Henie's films for New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and wrote the official museum notes for the series. He's completed a novel, "KISS & CRY: Skating for Gold," and has written a play, "Ava," optioned by the great producer David Brown, based on the life of Ava Gardner.