

Sidedoor Season 4, Episode 13: Adam Rippon's Olympic Mesh-capades

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Years ago, when I was in college, I donated a sweater to a clothing drop. And a few weeks later, on my way to class, I spied it: across the quad, in the wild, my sweater. On. Another. Woman. It felt so strange to see this thing that felt really personal to me; this black knit sweater that I'd picked out with my grandma and worn for years, on a stranger. It was an odd thrill; this mix of surprise and a twinge of betrayal, but most of all, this assort of secret pride that someone else wanted something of mine. And I kind of wanted to go up and touch it, but that would have been inappropriate, and you know, a little creepy because it's not mine anymore.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: So, imagine my surprise when I learned that this is an experience that I share with American Olympic Figure Skater and Bronze Medalist, Adam Rippon.

Adam Rippon: I wanted to go touch it, but now I know that if I touch it, I'll get in trouble. So that's like the biggest difference from seeing it right now.

Lizzie Peabody: A few weeks ago, Adam Rippon visited the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History to see an item in their collection that once belonged to him. In fact, it was made for him. It's the costume he wore to the men's figure skating free skate event in the 2018 Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea. But now, the costume sits on a mannequin at the National Museum of American History. And seeing it in the museum, it seems like this is the first time Rippon realizes, it's not just his Olympic figure skating costume. Now, it's American history. A quick note: it was midday in the museum, so it was a little noisy.

[CROWD NOISE]

Lizzie Peabody: I gotta say it's even shinier than it looked on television.

Adam Rippon: I think... wait until you see when there's like, some spotlights on it. It's uh, it's quite the show, but yeah, it's really beautiful!

Lizzie Peabody: It really is beautiful. All right. And those are the pants you wore too?

Adam Rippon: Yes, they are. Whole thing. Skates and everything.

Lizzie Peabody: Adam Rippon's 2018 Olympic performance helped the United States win a bronze medal in the team figure skating event. And Adam himself was the first openly gay American to medal at the Winter Olympics ever. His costume was the sparkling focal point of a powerful moment in our country's history. And that is why the Smithsonian wanted it for our collections. So back at our studio, I got right to the hard-hitting questions:

Lizzie Peabody: So, do you think that you could still fit into that costume today?

Adam Rippon: No. (laughs) I'm sure of it.

Lizzie Peabody: Really?

Adam Rippon: Yeah! I'm sure! You know how there's like um, if you go to Petco, there's like a small, medium and large and your dog is like a medium dog, but you know, he's sort of a large dog, so you get medium and you shove him in this hot dog costume and he looks a mess.

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs).

Adam Rippon: I think I would be the, you know, the medium dog who's actually, you know, doesn't fit in the Labrador's costume, but he doesn't fit in the French Bulldog costume either sort of, you know, flat there in the middle.

Lizzie Peabody: (laughs).

Adam Rippon: You know, the dog that doesn't fit in the hot dog costume is basically what you guys have here at this Smithsonian now. (Laughs).

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs). Fortunately, Rippon's costume doesn't accessorize well with mustard. Even so, I had a lot of questions, about what goes into creating a costume that leaves such a strong impression because of where it's been and what it represents. So, this time on Sidedoor, Adam Rippon on his Olympic magic, mesh and the male private part that I didn't even know was a private part at all. Don't miss it!

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: To start our interview, I asked Adam Rippon to close his eyes, take a deep breath and trust me.

Adam Rippon: Okay. They're both closed. I'm really doing it by the way.

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs). No, he's doing it. I can confirm that his eyes are closed.

Adam Rippon: Hmm, mmm.

[AUDIO OF A CROWD CHEERING]

Lizzie Peabody: So, you're standing in front of a crowd of thousands in this arena, um, plus of course, millions more on TV.

Adam Rippon: Hmm, mmm.

Lizzie Peabody: This is the sound of the crowd greeting Adam Rippon in February 2018, at Gangneung Ice Arena as he skates out on the ice to begin his Olympic performance. And then there's this moment of stillness right before the first notes of music.

Adam Rippon: Hmm, mmm.

Lizzie Peabody: And you sort of touch your hand to your chest and you turn your head to the side. And what are you thinking?

Adam Rippon: Um, okay. Truly, I remember in this moment it's, um, you know, somehow closing your eyes is really like bringing me there and my eyes are still closed. My hand is on my chest. I'm thinking that I've never been more nervous in my entire life. I feel more ready than I've ever been. And I remember thinking that there are probably, um, a lot of people watching at home and to remind myself of that. Even if this feels like a morning practice that don't forget that this is the moment, this is the moment that really counts.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: And then he begins to skate.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: His performance centers on this idea of flight. That's reflected in the music he chose: Coldplay's, "O, Fly On," and "Arrival of the Birds" by Cinematic Orchestra, which is what you're hearing now. But his costume is birdlike as well; the colors are sort of reminiscent of a sparkling peacock. And what does it feel like to be in your body, like when the music starts and you start to move?

[MUSIC]

Adam Rippon: Um, I'm, I'm, I'm treating this like therapy by the way.

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs).

Adam Rippon: Once I'm like about 10 steps in, I feel exactly how I feel during every practice.

Lizzie Peabody: So, muscle memory kind of takes over?

Adam Rippon: Hmm, mmm. And my like, commands to myself are very basic. Before I do any performance, I choose um, three to five different words that I'll repeat to myself that have a meaning to me. So, I think the whole point of, for me, saying those three key words repeatedly over and over, is that I never gave myself the chance or the opportunity to trick myself into thinking I wasn't ready or prepared.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: That's great advice. So, do you remember what words you were thinking that day?

[MUSIC]

Adam Rippon: I was thinking, "breathe." I was thinking, "power" and I was thinking, "jump." And those are my only three words.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: So, you do, you take off. You're like this bird across the ice. You're gliding and you're jumping and you're spinning. And then, after this final incredible spin, you stop and it's all over.

[CROWD APPLAUSE AND CHEERING]

Lizzie Peabody: What does it feel like the moment you finally stop spinning?

[CROWD APPLAUSE AND CHEERING]

Adam Rippon: Um, in that exact moment, it feels like any other practice, but I also remember that I told myself to celebrate because this was like the moment that I have actually been working for. So, I took a moment to celebrate. And um, I remember for the first time thinking that there are lot of people from all sorts of different pockets of the U.S. and the world watching right now. And I felt like I was representing my more than just myself for the first time.

Lizzie Peabody: Hmm, mmm. What was it like to win a bronze medal?

Adam Rippon: Um, it's a process because it almost feels like whiplash.

Lizzie Peabody: Hmm.

Adam Rippon: The competition is like every other competition you've done before, but at the same time, it's not.

Lizzie Peabody: Hmm.

Adam Rippon: Um, the arenas feel the same. They smell the same. They have the same temperature inside of them. Like everything is the same about them except it's completely different.

Lizzie Peabody: Huh.

Adam Rippon: Um, and the only difference is the media that comes along with it. People wanted to hear what I had to say.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: That's why, if you followed these Olympics closely, or even if you didn't, Adam Rippon was hard to miss. Everywhere he turned, there was a reporter with a microphone. And Adam was always ready with an answer.

Adam Rippon Clip: "I want to make Reese Witherspoon proud."

Adam Rippon Clip: "I love money."

Adam Rippon Clip: "I can't explain witchcraft."

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: But after a few questions, most of his interviews landed here.

[MUSIC]

Adam Rippon Clip: "I'm really passionate about, you know, being an openly gay athlete. I'm passionate about being an American at these Olympic games..."

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Of course, Rippon isn't the first gay American Olympian to medal at the Winter Olympics. But unlike those who came before him, Rippon was already out and able to talk about it. This brought him attention others hadn't faced. So, I wanted to ask Adam about this experience of being openly gay at the Olympics, but first, I had to let him open his eyes.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Okay. So, now you may open your eyes.

Adam Rippon: Yeah. (Laughs).

Lizzie Peabody: Thank you! Thanks for doing that.

Adam Rippon: (Laughs). Yeah, it's fun!

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah.

Adam Rippon: Actually, that works really well.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Rippon says he likes to talk openly about being gay because he has a platform. Since the Olympics, he's continued his LGTBQ advocacy. He wants to be the athletic icon he never had growing up, to show the next generation that it's ok to be themselves, but he first came out publicly back in 2015, before he was famous.

Adam Rippon: You know, I was not a national champion up to that point. I was not an Olympian. So, for me to announce or say anything about me being gay was just not big news at all.

Lizzie Peabody: Hmm, mmm.

Adam Rippon: It was just something I felt really strongly about saying and just putting out there.

Lizzie Peabody: Hmm, mmm.

Adam Rippon: Um, so, in going into the 2018 Olympic games, I had already been an out athlete for two and a half, three years.

Lizzie Peabody: Hmm, mmm.

Adam Rippon: It just felt, you know, very trivial. Like, I'm from Scranton, I'm gay, I have, you know, curly hair that I Brazilian blow out. It just felt like a fun fact.

Lizzie Peabody: And this curly haired, gay Scrantonian embraced his new place in the camera's lights. Here he is in South Korea, claiming his mantel.

Adam Rippon: The other day I was joking to one of my friends, and um, he was like, "You're kind of everywhere right now." And I was like, "I know, I'm like America's Sweetheart."

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: And coming up after a quick break, America's self-proclaimed sweetheart walks me through the high stakes world of costume design and how too much mesh can get a skater into a lot of trouble.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: A few weeks ago, Adam Rippon visited the Smithsonian for a public signing of his memoir titled, "Beautiful on the Outside: A Memoir." Rippon is the first openly gay American to medal at the winter Olympics. I was eager to speak with him, in part, because, well, how often does an Olympic athlete walk into your office? But also, I wanted to know, what exactly goes into creating an Olympic figure skating performance?

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Turns out, there are three main components: music, jumps, and costume. So, I asked him what comes first.

[MUSIC]

Adam Rippon: Everybody's different.

Lizzie Peabody: Huh.

Adam Rippon: But, for me, music comes first. Then, the jumps would come after that. And then, if things felt like they were going well, like I had made the right choice with both the jumps and the outline and the spins and the music, then the costume came last.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: So, based on the music he chose, and the jumps he choreographed, Rippon had a pretty good idea of his performance's vibe. So, he needed a costume that would work thematically.

[MUSIC]

Adam Rippon: And so, we were really trying to find something that almost had this feel of um, looking like, almost like a peacock feather, but not being as um, in your face.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: To turn his vision into reality, Adam went to his close friend, Braden Overett. He's a costume designer and former figure skater himself. And Rippon gave his friend some vague idea as what he was looking for.

[MUSIC]

Adam Rippon: Well, I like to think of energy. And I like to think of a feeling that I like to have when I'm on the ice. And sometimes colors evoke a certain energy.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: And it was up to Overett to decipher exactly what that meant. After they picked colors, they needed a material to build the costume out of.

[MUSIC]

Adam Rippon: I always love to compete in like a mesh...

Lizzie Peabody: Why?

Adam Rippon: ...because, well, who doesn't love something a little slutty, you know?

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs).

Adam Rippon: It's the Smithsonian, but we're not dead.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs).

[MUSIC]

Adam Rippon: So, I um (Laughs). And to be honest, an arena gets really hot anyway.

Lizzie Peabody: Right. Right.

[MUSIC]

Adam Rippon: And we're on the prowl, you know. (Laughs).

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs).

[MUSIC]

Adam Rippon: Um, but, so, I also like to skate in something that was really tight because I didn't like to have anything flying or floating around.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: So, for the material that wouldn't rip or distract Adam while he skated, they picked skintight mesh.

Adam Rippon: So for this costume, Braden and I, we decided that the mesh underneath would be the color of my skin, so that when he would airbrush um, the different veins of this feather,

that the places of the mesh that he would miss would peek through and they would be my own skin, almost kind of feeling like you could feel the wind blowing through the feather.

Lizzie Peabody: And once Overett stitched the top together, it was time for the crystals.

Adam Rippon: And there were over, you know, 5,000 different crystals on that shirt.

Lizzie Peabody: 5,000 crystals, on the shirt alone.

Lizzie Peabody: You say crystals. What are they made of?

Adam Rippon: They're like glass.

Lizzie Peabody: Hmm.

Adam Rippon: Yeah. Crystals.

Lizzie Peabody: So not, not your average sequins? They're not sequins...

Adam Rippon: They're not sequined?

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs).

Adam Rippon: No. It's not 1990. It's almost 2020.

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs). Excuse me.

Adam Rippon: Yeah. You're forgiven, but I won't forget. (Laughs).

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs). That's fair.

Lizzie Peabody: When Overett was done, the costume was a masterpiece. There's a dark blue channel that runs up the center of Adam's torso; the effect is a little like the stem of a peacock feather. Toward his arms and shoulders, the colors get lighter. You see bright blues, aquas and greens. And the costume shimmers when Rippon skates across the ice.

Adam Rippon: And so, it might feel like a lot of crystals on this shirt, but from any point in the arena, I will look like the most important thing there. And that's why the experience of seeing it up close and seeing it from far away is so different.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: But this wasn't Adam's first "mesh-capade." It's important to know, when judges score a figure skating performance, they take costume into consideration as well. So, costume choices have consequences. And for a long time, showing too much skin was against the rules.

Adam Rippon: You know, it's very taboo. For so long, men in single skating, were not allowed to expose their shoulders.

Lizzie Peabody: Hmm.

Adam Rippon: It's a male private part.

Lizzie Peabody: That's right skaters. Keep those shoulders covered. But a couple years before the 2018 Olympics, the figure skating rules body decided, "Tank tops would be okay."

[MUSIC]

Adam Rippon: And so, immediately I had this tank top for a short program.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: A tank top made of... you guessed it!

[MUSIC]

Adam Rippon: The back was mesh.

Lizzie Peabody: Hmm, mmm.

Adam Rippon: The front was a full, like a solid material and um, the first competition I did, four of the five judges declared they wanted to give a costume violation and then they said that they would convince the next flight of judges at my next event to fully give that deduction.

Lizzie Peabody: A costume violation is a penalty. It would deduct points from his performance, and this could hurt his ranking, and potentially jeopardize his shot at the Olympics. At first, Rippon was angry. He thought the judges needed to read the rules! Clearly, tank tops were fine! But the judges found another rule.

[MUSIC]

Adam Rippon: And they said that they were falling back on this other rule that they found where 70% of your body needed to be covered.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Basically, the effect of the tank top plus mesh, the judges felt like they were seeing a little too much Adam.

[MUSIC]

Adam Rippon: So, they said I only had...

Lizzie Peabody: Ahh...

Adam Rippon: ...you know, the front of my chest covered and they felt like that was not conservative enough.

Lizzie Peabody: Hmm. (Laughs).

Adam Rippon: It wasn't like I had my phone number on the back.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs). So, approaching his next competition, Adam needed a solution, fast. (Laughs).

[MUSIC]

Adam Rippon: What is a boy to do?

[MUSIC]

Adam Rippon: And so I, it was in Paris and I took the subway to some random H&M. It was the only thing I could find.

Lizzie Peabody: Hmm, mmm.

Adam Rippon: Um, and I went and I got a black tank top and I got it so that I wore the tank top underneath my costume. I had one of my friends cut out the sleeves so that the mesh would be all gone in the back. So, the next day, the judges came up to our team leader and they were like, we are going to give Adam that deduction. We've like all decided. So just prepare him for that. And I was like, all right, well watch this. I'm going to H&M.

Lizzie Peabody: Rippon's new tank top covered his back, so the judges saw less of Adam. No skin, no deduction. No problem. And as we know, Adam did go on to qualify for the Olympics and he won bronze! But while figure skating dominated his life for so long, he's quick to add that this bronze medal doesn't define him. It's just part of his story.

Adam Rippon: So, being on the podium felt like a moment for my coaches, for my family, for my friends who have been with me for years and years and they've seen me through those ups and downs. The moment I felt like I had been waiting for my entire life was all of this media.

Lizzie Peabody: Today, Rippon looks forward to his next professional steps, building on the profile that he established at the Olympics.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: He continues to be a strong advocate for the LGBTQ community. He's even been honored by the Human Rights Campaign. And his memoir was called, "comedic gold" by the Washington Post.

[MUSIC]

Adam Rippon: Which is sort of like a life defining moment.

Lizzie Peabody: Rippon also won season 26 of "Dancing with The Stars," where, he wore mesh, of course.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUSE AND CHEERING]

Dancing with The Stars Playback: "Adam and Jenna!"

[AUDIENCE APPLAUSE AND CHEERING]

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: And coming in 2020, he's hosting a web series that will appear on a new On-Demand video platform. He's got plenty to look forward to. And his Olympic costume is here, at the Smithsonian forever.

[MUSIC]

Adam Rippon: The costume that I donated represented a lot to me. Um, it represented my whole journey. Uh, it represented that whole moment and I wanted to be able to share that moment with everyone because, as much as that moment was mine, it felt like a moment for a lot of other people as well.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Truly, Adam you are, as you say, America's sweetheart. (Laughs).

Adam Rippon: (Laughs). Yeah. No other like scam grater has been pulled, but I pulled it.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: I want to give Adam Rippon a special thank you for his generosity with his time. If you want to hear more from Adam, you can get to know him very well in his new book, "Beautiful on the Outside: A Memoir."

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to Sidedoor - a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: If you'd like to see a video of Adam Rippon's skintight bird costume, as well as his bronze medal winning Olympic performance, you'll find them in our newsletter! Subscribe at si.edu/Sidedoor. There's also a link in our episode notes.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: If you like the show, leave us a review on Apple Podcasts because...

Adam Rippon clip: ...it's the Smithsonian, but we're not dead!

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: A good review makes me feel the way Adam Rippon does when he's performing in mesh and crystals.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Sidedoor is made possible with help from people like you! Your generous support helps make all the amazing work you hear about at the Smithsonian possible.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Special thanks to Adam Rippon, Jimmy Franco, Paul Peachey, whose car was towed during our interview. Sorry Paul! And Laura Duff for their help in making this episode happen!

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Our podcast team is Justin O'Neill, Jason Orfanon, Michelle Harven, Caitlin Shaffer, Jess Sadeq, Lara Koch, and Sharon Bryant. Episode artwork is by Greg Fisk. Extra support comes from John, Jason and Genevieve at PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and other episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: If you want to sponsor our show, please email sponsorship@prx.org. I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

[MUSIC]

Adam Rippon: You know, if you want to ask me what was the last thing I like tried to buy on Amazon, it will say Swarovski Crystal Broach.

Lizzie Peabody: Okay. What was the last thing you tried to buy on Amazon?

Adam Rippon: Ex... (stammers) Swarovski Crystal Broach!

Lizzie Peabody: Were you successful?

Adam Rippon: No!

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs).

Adam Rippon: They don't make one!

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs). Well, there are other crystals out there.

Adam Rippon: Okay. I'll be looking.

[MUSIC]