

Craig Gillespie's *I, Tonya*: Confessions of a media pariah

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Directed by Craig Gillespie; written by Steven Rogers

I, Tonya, directed by Craig Gillespie (*Lars and the Real Girl*, 2007; *Million Dollar Arm*, 2014), depicts the life and times of Tonya Harding, the former Olympic figure skater at the center of a media scandal following an assault on rival skater Nancy Kerrigan ahead of the 1994 Winter Olympics.

The film has drawn considerable critical praise and Allison Janney, who portrays Harding's mother, LaVona Golden, recently won an Academy Award.

Gillespie organizes the film around a series of interviews conducted with a fictional Harding (Margot Robbie), her ex-husband Jeff Gillooly (Sebastian Stan), LaVona (Janney), and a number of other figures in the skater's life. It depicts Harding's hardscrabble early life, her struggle to receive recognition from skating authorities who want a more "traditional" (i.e., less plebeian) champion, and the devastating impact of the eventual scandal on her personal and professional life. It is an attempt, however limited, to humanize a woman demonized by the American media.

I, Tonya pays considerable attention to Harding's upbringing. LaVona, a chain-smoking, foul-mouthed alcoholic in Gillespie's film, takes her young daughter to figure skating lessons while working as a waitress. Harding's undeniable skill and power set her apart as a world-class athlete.

Harding enters into a relationship with Gillooly in part to escape her mother. However, he proves to be violent too, and several sequences depict their relationship's cycle of brutality and reconciliation. (Harding, though often the victim, is shown dishing out her fair share of the abuse as well.)

Despite Harding's talent, she repeatedly earns lower marks on her routines than she deserves due to her

handmade costumes, use of rock music in her routines, and profane, rough-and-tumble personality, which conflicts with the image of the "ice princess" skater that judges are looking to promote.

In response, Harding develops her athletic skill. In 1991, she becomes the first United States woman to successfully land a triple axel jump in competition, a feat that few skaters even attempt. However, her troubled personal life takes its toll, and she finishes fourth at the 1992 Olympic Games. As she says in the film, "When you come in fourth in the Olympics, you don't get endorsement deals. You get the 6 a.m. shift at Spud City."

Harding becomes convinced that defeating rival Nancy Kerrigan at the 1994 Games (held only two years later because of the International Olympic Committee's decision to place the Summer and Winter Games on separate four-year cycles in alternating even-numbered years) will require underhanded methods. She and Gillooly enlist the help of his friend Shawn Eckhardt (Paul Walter Hauser), a self-proclaimed bodyguard and "international counterterrorism expert," to intimidate Kerrigan. The resulting assault and investigation becomes a media sensation.

The real-life Harding-Kerrigan incident revealed a number of unseemly things about the world of Olympic figure skating—and, indeed, American life generally. It was one of a number of sensationalized scandals splashed on the front pages of both the tabloids and the "legitimate" newspapers during the early 1990s, a period of political reaction and cultural decline. The worship of money and the market, accompanied by the notion that "force works" (in the blunt words of the *Wall Street Journal* following the Persian Gulf War in 1991), exercised an especially unhealthy influence in these years.

In addition to the Harding-Kerrigan incident, the years 1994-95 witnessed the O J. Simpson affair, the Menendez brothers trial, the launching of the Paula Jones sexual harassment suit against President Bill Clinton, the “Republican Revolution” (Republican success in the midterm 1994 elections), the Susan Smith murder trial in South Carolina and the Oklahoma City bombing carried out by right-wing terrorist Timothy McVeigh. Despite the official triumphalism, America was coming apart at the seams.

Insofar as *I, Tonya* touches on the cutthroat, money-soaked world of professional sports, the hypocrisy of Olympic Committee bureaucrats, and the cynicism of the various news media outlets, it contains some intriguing moments. But the film is glancing when it should be biting, and its lack of social insight and ill-conceived, sarcastic tone prevent it from reaching any deep-going conclusions about the events it depicts.

Gillespie’s film is confused in its attitude toward Harding. At times, it seems to be lionizing her, presenting her as something of a “working class heroine” fighting against discrimination. At other times, it makes her the butt of various jokes, depicting her, Gillooly and Eckhardt as a trio of bumbling fools. In two of *I, Tonya*’s most unpleasant sequences, the abuse that Harding experiences at the hands of her mother and her husband is played for comedy, with montages set to lighthearted rock music.

Far more deserving targets, however, are largely spared from being ridiculed, such as the tabloid vultures, and the media executives who, in real life, were deliberately stoking the scandal in order to boost TV ratings for the skating events.

The Harding-as-heroine approach also carries problems. Despite the film’s presentation of Harding as a rebellious figure, her actions are entirely of an individualist and careerist character (the real-life Harding once remarked that she saw “dollar signs” in her head when she was skating successfully). While such attitudes no doubt exist within the high-pressure world of competitive skating, where millions of dollars in endorsement deals are at stake, Harding’s “do anything to win” mindset is presented relatively uncritically.

As for the famous assault on Kerrigan itself, the filmmakers take as good coin Harding’s claim to have had nothing to do with it, only approving of a separate

plan to send threatening notes to her rival.

I, Tonya spends much of its time focused on Harding’s personal life, while never delving very seriously into her psychology or personality. The film’s depiction of working class life, while perhaps an effort to portray people and experiences that rarely make it to movie screens, is mostly quite shallow. Trucks, rock music and “colorful” profanity have long been lazy Hollywood shorthand for the working class, and the filmmakers don’t go much deeper than that here.

Gillespie shoots the film in a breezy style, with garish colors and long tracking shots that glide (or perhaps skate) past events. The tone prevents the viewer from ever feeling the weight of stress, indignity, and uncertainty in Harding’s life. When she explains that “I was doing six hours a day of practice and competitions while I worked at a hardware store, and I ran a forklift and a drill press, and I did welding,” one doesn’t genuinely get a sense of how difficult such a life must have been, nor how these various pressures would likely contribute to the abuse she experienced in her relationships.

Artistic problems emerge as well. Robbie’s performance is uneven, which is perhaps not surprising given that she was asked to portray Harding at various points in her life spanning decades. The soundtrack contains a series of ironically used rock and pop songs, which this reviewer found intrusive and distracting. The pacing is clumsy, as are the wild shifts in tone.

I, Tonya lacks both the genuine anti-authoritarian sentiment and the self-sacrificing spirit of a work like Robert Aldrich’s *The Longest Yard* (1974). Nevertheless, one hopes that Gillespie, Robbie, and the rest of the filmmakers will deepen their artistic interest in working class life in the future.



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