

People & Places

Film

What made Tonya tick

'Sharp Edges' docu on Harding made in 1986

By Owen Gleiberman

'Sharp Edges' (as in blades) is the perfect title for a documentary about Tonya Harding. But who would have had the prescience to think that title a decade before her infamy? Last year, when "I, Tonya" came out, there were those (like me) who flipped for it, and those who didn't. The appearance this week of "Sharp Edges," a documentary about Harding made in 1986, eight years before the incident that made her famous, isn't likely to change minds in either camp. Yet as an "I, Tonya" believer, I watched this fascinating found object of a movie, directed by Sandra Luckow as her senior-thesis project at Yale, eager to see if it supported or undercut the vision of Tonya Harding and her demons put forth by Craig Gillespie's audacious awards-bait docudrama.



Harding

What it reveals, to me, is how close to the truth of Harding's life "I, Tonya" really came. The documentary, which is getting a one-week theatrical release in New York and Los Angeles starting July 6 (after which it will be available on streaming services), is only 48 minutes long, and it's shot on VHS, which gives it a slightly sludgy live-action period look that now seems completely exotic. "Sharp Edges" is desultory at moments, but it's also inquiring. We hang out with Tonya, who was just 15 at the time, and the movie wants to know what makes her tick — what she desires and what she's up against.

We're never told how the filmmaker stumbled onto her subject, but, amazingly, Luckow embraces the idea — it's the whole premise of the movie, really — that Tonya Harding was destined for athletic stardom. At 15, she can already do a triple axel (called a "triple jump" here), which sets her rivetingly apart, and just as vital she has the charisma of the dispossessed. "I don't mind being the underdog," says Tonya, "because once I skate and do my best, they'll know who I am." Them's fightin' words.

Even as a teenager, Tonya already looks the part of who she became. (She looks it in her toddler pictures.) With her raccoon mascara and junk-food pallor, her frosted short hair and a smile that's shaped like a debauched pair of butterfly wings, she has a surly mall-chick defiance that's very 1980s — at times, she could almost be auditioning to join the Runaways. One look at her and the film's theme is announced: This is a terrific figure skater, maybe a sublime one, who is not a happy camper. There's an arresting element of androgyny to Harding's appearance; she's pretty as hell but possesses a boyish scowl, like Princess Diana with a touch of Tom Sawyer. That bad girl-meets-bad boy pout is the trademark of her angry, queuing, unsettled nature.

Her family, in a word, is trash — not because of their class, but because they're a dysfunctional clan of petty crooks and scuzzbucket lost souls: the brother she describes as a thief, who gets into drunken brawls ("I don't do that!" she snaps, a comment that's pointed enough to make it sound like it could be an option), or the sister who ran away when she was 13 and became a streetwalker.

And then, of course, there's LaVona. Was Allison Janney's Oscar-winning performance over-the-top, as a handful of detractors claimed? It turns out that she studied footage from this film (as the creators of "I, Tonya" did — that may be why they chose to make it a mock documentary), and if you watch "Sharp Edges" it's clear that she got eerily close to the real thing.

The LaVona we see here is a brittle eccentric who sits in a fur coat, a parakeet on her shoulder, her hair in severe bangs that look like the bowl cut worn by Moe Howard of the Three Stooges. Her tone is harsh and bitter, dry and defensive, and there isn't a word out of her mouth that's not uttered with angry certitude. She says that Tonya eats, breathes, and sleeps skating, but that "The bigger the 'You can't do it,' the better and the best she'll do it." Luckow then asks: What if you didn't challenge her with obstacles? LaVona replies: "She'd be nothing. Absolutely nothing." Maybe she's right, yet this seems to be her way of saying that Tonya, deep down, really is nothing. Tonya says of her mother, "She hits me, and she beats me, and she drinks... Everything she does, she takes it out on me." The weird thing is, she says it as if it's a normal state of affairs.

Training

Tonya's coach, Diane Rawlinson (played by Julianne Nicholson in "I, Tonya"), explains that training to be a figure skater is outrageously expensive: the clothes, the choreography, the rink time. Dorothy Hamill, who is mentioned several times as an obvious role model for Tonya, spent \$35,000 a year when she was training in the mid-'70s. (That's the equivalent of \$150,000 today.) Tonya, when she was just five, was talented enough to win a pair of sponsors who saw her potential, but they cut out after witnessing LaVona's behavior at competitions — specifically, when they saw her beating Tonya with a hairbrush.

Watching "Sharp Edges," I understood more deeply why "I, Tonya" turned into a black comedy of lower-middle-class rage and insanity. The shabby meanness of Harding's background is a deadly serious thing, but in "Sharp Edges," as you listen to the pile-up of sordid dysfunction, in contrast to the aspirational bubblyness of those trying to lift Tonya out of the gutter (her coach's phrase), it does start to sound funny. It's like a wrestling match between Tonya and the heartland dementia that threatens, at every turn, to drag her down.

Yet Tonya herself isn't a comic figure. She's a vulnerable human being with star quality — a true athlete-artist, one who wears her attitude as armor. At the 1986 USA National Figure Skating Championships in Nassau County, New York, we see, backstage, the other skaters, one of whom has hair just like Tonya's, but her face is serene, whereas Tonya always looks like she's about to cry. She goes out shopping with Rawlinson and her choreographer, Vicki Mills, who says, "We need to class up your act." Tonya tries on an elegant long black dress, and we see her discomfort in it. It may not be "her," but it's also that she doesn't believe in herself enough to support an unironic princess look.

On the ice, however, she rules. Her biggest disadvantage in competition — and probably the biggest distortion of "I, Tonya" — is her height. Harding is a compact 5'1", compared to Nancy Kerrigan, Dorothy Hamill, or Peggy Fleming, who are all 5'4". Margot Robbie, who played her so brilliantly in "I, Tonya," is 5'6". The real Harding stands less sylphlike, less like a glorious swan. Yet at the Nassau competition, in a green sequin dress that looks marvelous on her, she gives a startling performance: poised, daring, virtuosic, and, in its way, regal. She comes in fifth out of seventeen, then phones her mother, who according to Tonya says, "You did terrible, you know that? You sucked!" "Sharp Edges" is a curio that reveals there's a very thin blade indeed between comedy and tragedy. (RTRS)



In this file photo taken on Feb 11, 2016, French writer, journalist and movie producer Claude Lanzmann poses in Paris. (AFP)

Obituary

'His films took inspirations from chapters of his own life' 'Shoah' director Lanzmann dies

PARIS, July 5, (AP) — French Director Claude Lanzmann, whose 9½-hour masterpiece "Shoah" bore unflinching witness to the Holocaust through the testimonies of Jewish victims, German executioners and Polish bystanders, has died at the age of 92.

Gallimard, the publishing house for Lanzmann's autobiography, said he died Thursday morning at a hospital in Paris. It gave no further details.

The power of "Shoah," filmed in the 1970s during Lanzmann's trips to the barren Polish landscapes where the slaughter of Jews was planned and executed, was in viewing the Holocaust as an event in the present, rather than as history. It contained no archival footage, no musical score — just the landscape, trains and recounted memories.

Lanzmann was 59 when the movie, his second, came out in 1985. It defined the Holocaust for those who saw it, and defined him as a filmmaker.

"I knew that the subject of the film would be death itself. Death rather than survival," Lanzmann wrote in the autobiography. "For 12 years I tried to stare relentlessly into the black sun of the Shoah."

"Shoah" was nearly universally praised. Roger Ebert called it "one of the noblest films ever made" and Time Out and The Guardian were among those ranking it the greatest documentary of all time. The Polish government was a notable dissenter, which dismissed the film as "anti-Polish propaganda," (but later allowed "Shoah" to be aired in Poland).

In 2013, nearly three decades later, Lanzmann revisited the Holocaust with "The Last of the Unjust," focusing on his interviews in 1975 with a Vienna rabbi who was the last "elder" of the Theresienstadt ghetto, which was used by the Nazis to fool visitors into believing that the Jews were being treated humanely.

His final film in 2017, "Napalm," was essentially a narrative of his visit to North Korea in the late 1950s, including him recounting his unconsummated affair with a Red Cross nurse in the country.

Lanzmann had never stopped working, regularly presenting films which often took their inspiration from chapters of his own life.

But it was the 1985 release of "Shoah" (the French word for Holocaust), considered by many the most haunting film made about the murder of six million Jews during World War II, which propelled him to global acclaim.

The nine-and-a-half hour work consists largely of interviews with survivors and witnesses of Nazi death camps in Poland, alongside chilling images of where the horrors occurred. "If I am unstoppable it's because of the truth, which I believe in profoundly," he said in an interview with AFP last year.

"When I look at what I did in my life, I believe that I came to represent the truth, I never played with it."

Lanzmann was born Nov 27, 1925, in Paris, the child of French Jews. After his mother left in 1934 and the war broke out, Claude and his two siblings moved to a farm where their father timed his children as they practiced escaping to a shelter he had dug.

Lanzmann ultimately joined the Resistance as a Communist and became intellectually enamored with Jean-Paul Sartre, whose "Anti-Semite and Jew" formed the philosophical underpinning of what would later be his life's work.

Opportunist

Lanzmann joined Sartre's circle and ended up having an affair with Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre's companion who was 17 years older than the young acolyte. Lanzmann left for Israel and moved in with Beauvoir when he returned, from 1952 to 1959, according to "The Patagonia Hare," his autobiography. Sartre, Lanzmann's hero, became a constant in their life together.

"So I was an opportunist — 'on the make' you say. But she was beautiful. My attraction to her was genuine," he once told Beauvoir's biographer. Long after their affair ended, Beauvoir provided much of the financial support for "Shoah."

Lanzmann tinkered in politics and journalism, working periodically for the journal France Dimanche, taking on freelance assignments. He joined Sartre in signing the Manifesto for the 121, calling on French soldiers to refuse fighting in Algeria, and was prosecuted.

In 1968, he did television reporting on the Israeli Army in the Sinai Peninsula, which led to his first film: "Israel, Why?"

Beauvoir, writing about Lanzmann in her memoir "Force of Circumstance" described him as someone who "seemed to be carrying the weight of a whole ancestral experience on his shoulders."

It was this weight that ultimately led a vagabond intellectual to examine the defining event of 20th century Judaism, obsessively tracking down those who were closest to the dead. "The film would have to take up the ultimate challenge; take the place of the non-existent images of death in the gas chambers," he wrote.

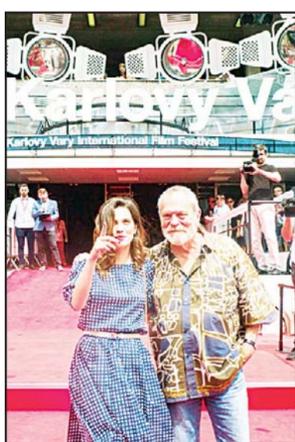
The film opens with Simon Srebnik, who as a 13-year-old Jewish detainee sang for the SS and fed their rabbits at the Chelmno concentration camp. Crediting a sweet voice with his survival, Srebnik performs the same songs for Lanzmann as he is rowed along the placid river that leads to the camp. Later, it is revealed that among Srebnik's tasks was to dump bags filled with crushed bones of Jews into the same waters.

He filmed Abraham Bomba at work in a Tel Aviv barbershop, describing how he cut women's hair inside the gas chambers Treblinka. With periodic questions by Lanzmann, Bomba recounts how after each group of women was done, the barbers were asked to leave for a few minutes, the women were gassed and then the men returned to cut the hair of dozens more naked women accompanied by their children.

"This room is the last place where they went in alive and they will never go out alive again," he said. "We just cut their hair to make them believe they're getting a nice haircut." The barber begged to stop when he recalled seeing the wife and sister of a friend come in, but Lanzmann prodded him to continue.

Tranter, formerly the frontman of Semi Precious Weapons, has had issues with the music industry, and consequently now prefers to work behind-the-scenes rather than on stage. "This business has proven to be just as racist, transphobic, homophobic and misogynistic as the rest of the world, so that's the obvious challenge," Tranter tells Variety. "The more subtle challenge is that most people don't want people who've actually experienced the hardest hardships singing about them because it's too real. They'd prefer a white, straight, cis 'ally' singing and speaking about it because it makes them less uncomfortable. But those days are over, honey. The truth should come from the source." (RTRS)

BOSTON: The Boston Symphony Orchestra is returning to its seasonal home at Tanglewood. Music director **Andris Nelsons** will conduct works by **Mozart** and **Tchaikovsky** as the renowned orchestra kicks off its 2018 outdoor season on Friday evening at the western Massachusetts venue. Superstar pianist **Lang Lang** will play Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 24 in C minor. This summer's season, which runs through Sept 2, continues the BSO's year-long homage to **Leonard Bernstein**. The Massachusetts-born conductor and composer would have turned 100 on Aug 25. He died in 1990 at age 72 in New York City. (AP)



British film director Terry Gilliam and Portuguese actress Joana Ribeiro pose on the red carpet before a screening of their film 'The Man Who Killed Don Quixote' at the 53rd Karlovy Vary International Film Festival (KVIFF) on July 4, Karlovy Vary, Czech Republic. (AFP)



Refn



Diamond

Variety

LOS ANGELES: Nicolas Winding Refn, the Danish director of films including "Drive" and "The Neon Demon" unloaded on the dystopian state of America in a blistering essay in the Guardian Wednesday. "This is a frightening time to be alive," Refn wrote. For the past six months, I've been shooting in America, and it seems increasingly clear we're now living in a dystopian reality TV show.

He offered the thought that difficult art could help make sense of difficult times, and introduced his new website BYNWR that will offer films he finds stimulating and provocative.

"America has always had a tendency towards the operatic but, fueled by the hand grenade of insanity that is Donald Trump, it's reached new heights of hysteria," the filmmaker continued.

Although he called Trump insane, he also seemed to take a David Lynch-esque view that through chaos comes meaningful change. (RTRS)

PARIS: Feminism should be taught in schools, said the French film legend **Agnes Varda**, who has become an icon for the #MeToo and Time's Up movements demanding equality in the film industry.

Varda, 90, who was nominated for an Oscar this year for her documentary "Faces Places" after winning an honorary one in 2017, said activism had to start in schools. "Feminism is not active enough in schools and colleges, and sexual education has flatlined," the veteran director told a "Women in Motion" gathering in Paris on Tuesday organized by the fashion conglomerate Kering.

"We do not talk enough about it to young men and women," she added. "We have to continue the fight. We thought in the 1960s that things would change quickly. But clearly that has not been the case."

Varda, the only female director who emerged from the French New Wave that rewrote the rules of cinema in the 1960s, has become an icon for many women in the industry. (AFP)

LOS ANGELES: "We're activists, we fight every day of our lives," says singer **Shea Diamond**. She's speaking for herself and hitmaker **Justin Tranter**, who executive

produced her debut EP "Seen It All" (Asylum Records). The two plan to celebrate its release by taking in a movie. "We need one night to let down our hair," she adds.



Actor Daniel Mays (from left), Thomas Turgoose, Rob Brydon, Jim Carter, Charlotte Riley, Oliver Parker, Rupert Graves (front right), pose for photographers upon arrival at the premiere of the film 'Swimming With Men' in central London on July 4. (AP)