

# Creatives

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*The Worlds  
We Make*  
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IN THIS  
SECTION

Composer  
Missy Mazzoli  
(CFA'02)

Documen-  
tary filmmaker  
Rel Dowdell  
(COM'96)

Author Weike  
Wang (GRS'15)

## Film

# Piecing Together *I, Tonya*

Tatiana S. Riegel (CAS'86)

earned Oscar nod  
for movie's  
editing / BY AMY

LASKOWSKI

TATIANA S. RIEGEL WAS skeptical when offered the editing job on a film about disgraced skating star Tonya Harding. But her attitude changed once she got her hands on the script. Riegel (CAS'86) was further reassured because she had worked on four films with Craig Gillespie, the film's director. "Craig is very good with that unique tone of doing something that's emotional and yet funny at the same time," she says. "And then when I started hearing about the cast, I was all over it."

Riegel's agreement to take the job was clearly the right decision. Her work on *I, Tonya* earned

"With the Tonya Harding story, the absurdity comes to it naturally," says Riegel, "just because of the people involved."



critical commendation, including the Eddie Award for Best Edited Feature Film, Comedy, from the American Cinema Editors, and an Academy Award nomination for best editor.

*I, Tonya*, which stars Margot Robbie as Harding and Allison Janney as her abusive mother, tracks the skating star's rise from scrappy, determined child skater to Olympic athlete, and her involvement in the infamous 1994 attack that sidelined competitor Nancy Kerrigan. The film, which cuts back and forth in time, doesn't shy away from the physical and emotional abuse Harding suffered at the hands of her mother and husband, or the skater's own struggles with violence and anger. Janney won the Oscar for best supporting actress for her work in the movie.

"I've seen the film 500 times, and I can still watch it again and again," says Riegel, whose three decades of film editing include work on *The Way Way Back*, *JFK*, and *Pulp Fiction*.

When *Bostonia* spoke with her last winter, Riegel was in Berlin, editing for the thriller *The Girl in the Spider's Web*, the latest installment in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* series.

***Bostonia*: When you were editing *I, Tonya*, were you worried about how to strike that delicate balance between the film's humor and violence?**

RIEDEL: That absolutely was the biggest challenge. We talked about it a lot. The first film Craig and I did together was *Lars and the Real Girl*, which is a very sweet, lovely story about a very odd topic. So, I knew that Craig would bring sensibility to this.

With the Tonya Harding story, the absurdity comes to it naturally just because of the people involved, and the reality of the story is that it is just crazy and absurd.

Craig had seen a documentary featuring a 15-year-old Tonya Harding, and there was a moment in it that he was very touched and moved by. She was speaking in this very matter-of-fact

way about her mother hitting her, and he saw this interesting thing that happens with people when they are abused: they detach and disassociate emotionally from what's going on with them. So, he tried to come up with a way to bring that into the film.

**The film is shot in a mockumentary style. Can you talk about that approach?**

In order to tell Tonya Harding's story appropriately, you needed to have the reality of the abuse she was experiencing. To offset that, Craig wanted to show her ability to survive and get past this and detach. So that's how the idea came to break the fourth wall.

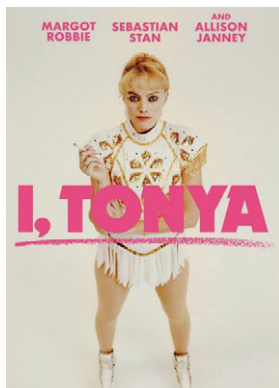
In the sequences where she's getting beaten up by her husband or thrown into a mirror, you cut to her turning to the camera and sort of speaking more as the 45-year-old Tonya talking back to us. You get this

sort of subconscious sense of survival and emotional detachment all at the same time. And I think for an audience member, it just makes it somehow a little more possible to survive when it's a pretty brutal scene.

**What went into editing the skating sequences?**

They were very planned out. Since it's a relatively small film, Craig had to be very efficient and plan out his shooting. They had a 31-day shoot and 260-some-odd scenes, so it was a very compressed schedule and a small budget.

The skating sequences of Harding were based on all of her real choreography. Each skating sequence has its own personality, and we talked about this a lot early in the process, so Craig shot it that way. In the very beginning of the film, she's younger and much more aggressive, so the scene where she's skating to ZZ Top is much faster and cut faster with many more angles. At the end of the film there is one long take, which is actually three takes put together as one, to really build the pressure and the tension of what's going on in her mind.



**Margot Robbie is not a professional skater, so special effects were required for the film's skating scenes. Had you ever done anything like that before?**

I had done other films with lots of visual effects, like *The Finest Hours*, and a little head and face replacement, but certainly not like in this film.

It was fun to learn how to do all the head and face replacement—it's hard to do. Fortunately, Margot could skate a fair amount, so we had a good amount of her as well. But she can't do the stuff that requires decades of training.

Every film now has visual effects, even if they don't think they're going to, just for cleanup: a boom gets in the shot or you have to fix something in the background like a billboard, a geography issue, a clearance issue. You have to take them out.

**You've said that you view a film editor almost as an audience member who can bring fresh eyes to the project. Can you elaborate?**

I really like keeping that distance. One of the hardest parts about editing is trying to keep it fresh and real and trying to remember what it's like watching it the first time. So, I do purposefully try to do that and not go to the set very much. For example, the second you walk onto a set, you know its geography. Whereas if stuff is coming in on film and you're watching it, you're like, wait, this room doesn't make any sense. I've had that happen many times where a director will go, "Well, it's right there, the door's right there," and I'm like, "Well, how am I supposed to know the door is right there? I don't see it, how am I supposed to know?"

And sometimes there's something very funny happening on set, and you have a whole crew of 100 people laughing because it's very funny in the moment, but sometimes that doesn't come across on the screen.

So, when I'm watching a film just on my monitor, I can really judge in a very realistic way what works and what doesn't work. There's so much in editing that starts getting manipulated anyway, in terms of performance and pacing and time compression, so you really want to keep it as fresh and clear as possible.