

KERRIGAN, HARDING GET 'ROCK OPERA' TREATMENT

MUSICAL DELVES INTO RIVALRY BETWEEN TWO SKATERS

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By Sarah S. Brannen, special to icenetwork.com

The most notorious incident in skating history has made its way to the stage, with plenty of glitter, spandex, and rock anthems thrown in. Tonya and Nancy: The Rock Opera is playing this week at Club Oberon in Cambridge, Mass. The show, based on the events surrounding the attack on Nancy Kerrigan at the 1994 U.S. championships, is an adaptation of an earlier version, Tonya and Nancy: The Opera. Both were written by Elizabeth Searle.

"For six years I've been working on various versions of the show, and people still want to talk about Tonya and Nancy," Searle told icenetwork.com. She said that she was a figure skating fan long before 1994.

"It's the only sport I really follow passionately," she said. "I remember just crying when I saw Midori Ito at the Olympics. When I was a little girl I loved Dorothy Hamill and Janet Lynn. I love the combination of the glamor, the grace, and the drama."

Of the millions who followed the media circus that was skating in 1994, there can't have been many whose first thought was, "Opera!" Searle explained how she made the connection.

"It was so dramatic," she said. "I was so caught up in it. The human emotions in the story were so raw. The jealousy, the desire to win no matter what, the anger you can feel at a rival, and the sense of being in disgrace. The story just fascinated me and the gripping event of the skate-off

-- I was kneeling by the radio

speakers in our living room as Nancy skated, just the idea of how much pressure both girls were under."

The show fills every corner of the small club/theater, and even spills out onto the street and beyond the opening and closing numbers. As theatergoers arrive, "reporters" push past them, shouting "Tonya! Tonya!" The actress who plays Harding walks by on the street, flanked by "Jeff Gillooly" and hounded by paparazzi. Her "mother" loudly disses "Kerrigan," who enters the theater next, chased by reporters in her turn.

Inside, a DJ plays appropriate tunes ("One Way or Another," "Jump," "Girls, girls, girls") while dancers clad in '80s glam gyrate on platforms. The actors, in character, mingle with the audience; Tonya's mother sat at our table and talked to us for a few minutes. Eventually the music, played by a tight, professional rock band, goes live, and the show gets underway with the entrance of Tonya and Nancy, in skating costumes and warm-up jackets, stretching as they sing "Three and a Half Minutes." (Which is odd, given that ladies' free skates were four minutes in the 1990s, as they are today).

Although the show begins in 1991 and continues a bit past 1994, it is principally about the media frenzy surrounding the bizarre and horrifying attack. It's all stylized and surreal, as it really has to be. Searle and director Janet

Roston don't just play the story for laughs; both Tonya and Nancy are portrayed as some-

what sympathetic, although cartoonish, characters.

Roston makes great use of the smallish space. Actors move through the audience, sing from every corner of the room and occasionally climb over the balcony and sing standing on tables. We were taken by surprise more than once as an actor jumped onto our table for a number.

Kristen Lee Sergeant is the spitting image of Kerrigan, and petite Darcie Champagne comes pretty close to Harding, apart from a distracting wig. Sergeant boasts a sweet, operatic soprano with a lot of power up top, and Champagne, also a fine singer, belts out Tonya's music with accuracy and energy. The actresses wear skating dresses throughout, although Tonya changes into a gown for her wedding to Jeff Gillooly. Johnny Blazes, playing Mrs. Harding (and Mrs. Kerrigan in one scene), and James Lynch, as Gillooly, are both nasty and hilarious. Timothy Lawton, as a buffoonish Shawn Eckhardt, plays it broad and very funny.

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Tickets are still available for tonight and Thursday; shows are at 7:30 pm and 10 pm at Club Oberon in Harvard Square, Cambridge, Mass. 18-and-over only.

