



# Actors Bridge Debuts Nate Eppler's Decidedly Curious *The Ice Treatment*

Taking its cues from Tonya Harding, Eppler's latest is like nothing you've ever seen

BY MARTIN BRADY — JULY 21, 2016 5 A.M.

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PHOTO: SHANE BURKEEN

**T**onya Harding was the poor white trash who dared to crash the beauty-queen pageant of international figure skating. She made a serious mark for a while, competing hard on the world stage and becoming the first American woman to perform a triple axel jump at an international event. Harding had to work hard to project artistry and grace on the ice, but her raw physical power was never in doubt. Alas, a rickety family life, poor management and an ill-advised marriage placed Harding behind the career eight ball.

The unprecedented events that took place after a practice session at the 1994 U.S. Figure Skating Championships in Detroit — when an idiot friend of Harding's loser husband whacked the knee of Nancy Kerrigan, Harding's chief competitor — marked the beginning of Harding's public end. She was the Raggedy Ann to Kerrigan's Barbie after that, and following a blown shot at the Lillehammer Olympics, she was driven from the sport she loved by ice-skating officials, who believed she was in on the Nancy-bashing plot. (Who doesn't remember the footage of Kerrigan weeping while asking, "Why?")

All of this past is prelude to consideration of playwright Nate Eppler's *The Ice Treatment*, now being presented in its world premiere by Actors Bridge Ensemble. A fascinating imagining on how Harding (or, that is, a person very much like her) might reimagine her life, Eppler's script goes deep into its protagonist's psyche and does so by way of some unusual but clearly very well-thought-out theatrics.

Like nothing you have probably ever seen before, *The Ice Treatment* is a decidedly curious semi-comedic piece. Neither Harding's nor anyone else's real name is used. Yet all the public figures involved are cleverly alluded to via evocative nicknames, and anyone who knows the real-life events will simply get it, especially when Eppler's protagonist, played by Rachel Agee, uses Barbie dolls and miniature backdrops to tell her version of the story, videotaped before our very eyes by a small production team. In between the "filming," our heroine (called "TT") revisits her unlikely rise and fall, insistently pleading her case as if in a court of law, with we the audience as judge and jury.

Agee's performance is of the epic variety — nonstop, always onstage, ever in motion — like a warrior of legend embarked on some unceasing heroic quest. She seeks to resolve her family demons (the oft-divorced mother who used to smack her with a hairbrush, her chronically underemployed dad), to come to grips with her athletic failures and to re-create the scenario of her demise and to claim innocence (or at least faultlessness).

It's compelling stuff, even as Eppler's full-length opus — two acts, with intermission, running almost two-and-a-half hours — takes some less-than-immediately-scrutable side trips into the world of unreported lost Soviet cosmonauts. (You're on your own there, folks.)

Agee is well assisted by two excellent supporting performances. Amanda Card serves as the important other females (TT's bad mom, her skating coach, etc.), and Antonio P. Nappo is essential as dad, cosmonaut and, most importantly, the creep boyfriend/husband who was anything but the helpmeet TT could've used in her life.

Interestingly, Eppler is not the first person to seek exegesis of Harding's life through art. Sitcom episodes, music videos, pop songs, documentaries, art installations, a chamber opera, a rock opera, books, even a film currently in production starring Margot Robbie — all have exploited the story's weird particulars and its protagonist's pathos. Yet the playwright, through previous works such as *Good Monsters* — produced earlier this year by Nashville Rep — maintains a serious interest in the role that lower-class (or, maybe better, unsophisticated) persons play in our oversaturated media environment, and in that regard *The Ice Treatment* plows some original territory, makes us think and even provokes our sympathy. (Eppler also directs the show and does well realizing its quirky rhythms.)

As for Harding, she will turn 46 later this year. She married for a third time in 2010 and has a young son, and as far as we know, maybe she's come to some peace of mind with the past. What she'll probably never find is redemption, but via Eppler's determinedly written opus, we are allowed to entertainingly cheer on her chance at

achieving catharsis.

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*The Ice Treatment*

Presented by Actors Bridge Ensemble

Through July 24 at Belmont's Black Box Theater

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