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A Barrage of Clichés

It's clear by now that Meg Ryan, the bubbling sweetheart of half a dozen romantic comedies, means to bring new substance and seriousness to the latest phase of her career. Witness the lonely New York English

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teacher she played in last year's brainy slasher flick, *In the Cut*: In no previous performance had she called up such long-repressed fury or frank sexual hunger. Credit Ryan for the will to

break out and director Jane Campion for the sense to encourage her — even though Ryan reportedly won the part only after first choice Nicole Kidman declined.

Seen in this light, the new Ryan vehicle, *Against the Ropes*, looks like a regression — if not an outright mistake — for an actress eager to expand her range. Despite the tacky wardrobe and the studied accent she employs, Ryan doesn't cut it as smart, street-hardened Jackie Kallen, who made a name for herself in the late 1980s as the first successful female boxing manager in a demimonde long ruled by bent-nosed Neanderthals with cigars stuck in their nasty maws. Ryan's mannered toughness looks like playacting, and she never quite convinces us she has seen the inside of a fight gym, much less that she is worthy to be *Rocky* in a miniskirt. On the other hand, her director here was not Campion but actor Charles S. Dutton, whose behind-the-camera skills, developed via cable TV, tend toward the cartoonish. Not only that, *Ropes* has been sitting on the shelf for almost a year, so it may not reflect how far the new Meg has come.

The real-life Kallen, a Detroit-born for-

mer sports writer and public-relations agent who parlayed her gifts into a barrier-breaking third career, was (and is) sheer chutzpah, with a dash of feminist willpower thrown in for good measure. After helping her very first boxer, James Toney, to the IBF middleweight and super-middleweight titles, she capitalized by knocking out a volume of self-help aphorisms, *Hit Me with Your Best Shot: A Fight Plan for Dealing with All of Life's Hard Knocks*, which indicates her gift for opportunism. Today, she manages a small stable of fighters, hires out as a "motivational speaker," and continues to grab the spotlight whenever possible.

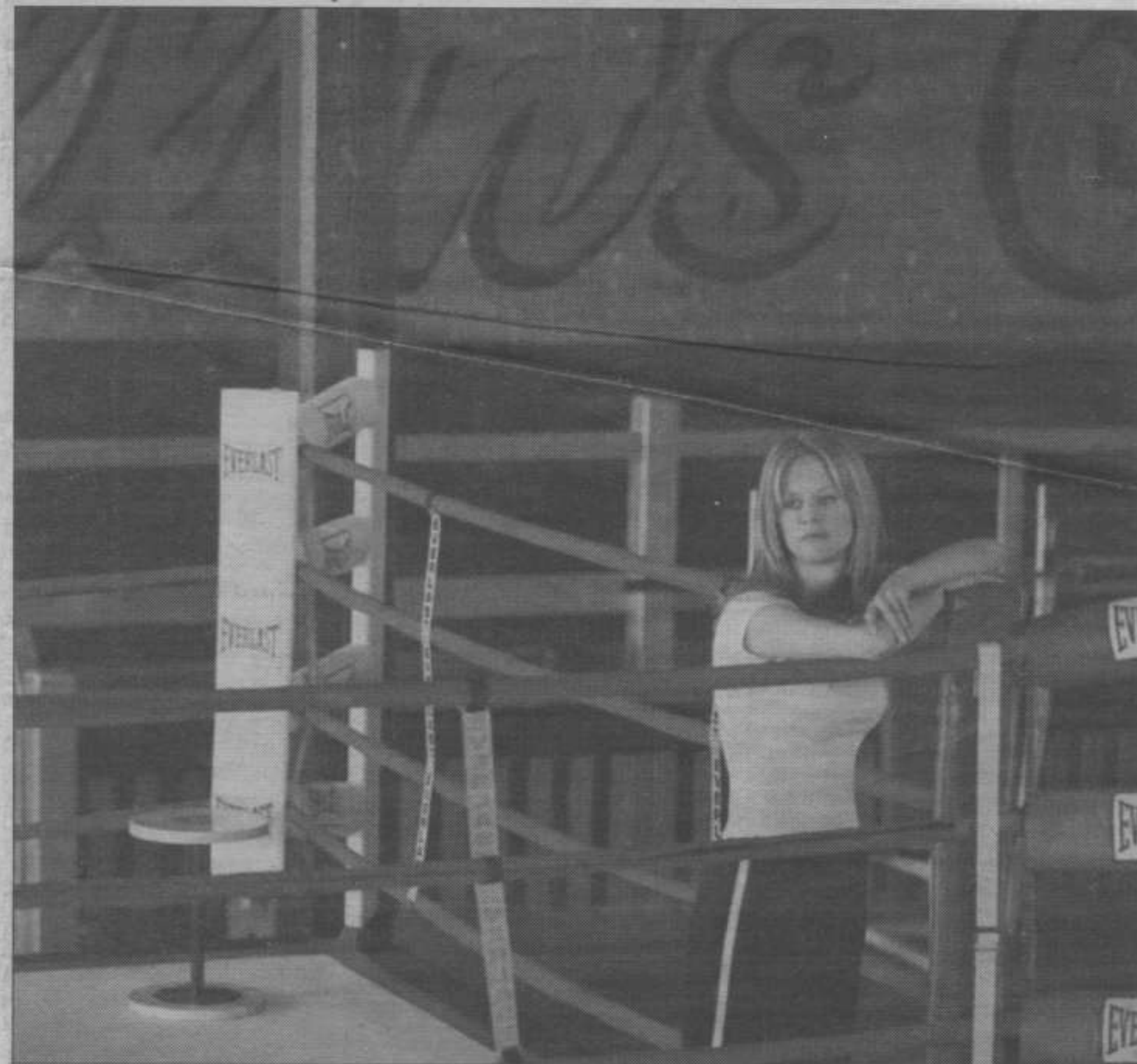
The highly fictionalized Jackie Kallen we get here, a fantasy version dreamed up and transplanted to Cleveland by screenwriter Cheryl Edwards (who also wrote the interracial teen romance *Save the Last Dance*) is, to put it gently, a more exemplary piece of work than the genuine article. She's a golden-tressed, golden-hearted striver who hardly ever stoops to the fight game's low deceptions or seedy manipulations. Instead,

Against the Ropes
Directed by Charles S. Dutton. Screenplay by Cheryl Edwards. Starring Meg Ryan, Omar Epps, Tony Shalhoub, and Charles S. Dutton. Opens Friday.

Ryan's Jackie treats everyone with saintly respect while nobly working her way to the top and casually deflecting a constant barrage of male chauvinist insults — from epithets like "half-pint" and "Barbie Doll" to guys lasciviously wagging their tongues at her. Only at her peak is the voracious, soul-killing publicity hound inside Jackie bestirred, but even then she sees the light and returns to form. In the actual, blood-stained world of boxing, this cleaned-up movie Jackie would have the same chance of survival as Woody Allen going four rounds with Lennox Lewis.

Meanwhile, Edwards and Dutton bring on all the usual fight-movie caricatures, albeit curiously well-scrubbed and vaguely sanitized in terms of speech and manner. The James Toney surrogate here is one Luther Shaw (*Higher Learning's*

East Bay Express 2/18-24/04 p.37



Omar Epps), whose raw skills Jackie first spots as he is punching his way out of a crack house, and who quickly (too quickly, it seems) comes around to her protective instincts and gift for inspiration. Epps, who also played Dr. Dennis Gant on *ER*, has been beautifully coached to look like a real boxer (kudos to fight fan Dutton for seeing to it), and the actual bouts may be the most authentic thing about the movie. Otherwise, we have Tony Shalhoub (famous these days as the obsessive-compulsive TV detective *Monk*) as the obligatory mean-spirited, mobbed-up fight promoter we see in every boxing flick, and Dutton himself as another familiar type, the wise old trainer who comes out of retirement because he has one last shot to develop a champion. Both guys are stuffed

Meg Ryan plays a hardly believable Jackie Kallen, a real-life boxing promoter, in *Against the Ropes*.

full of synthetic grit and pseudo-tough talk, but no less than Ryan herself.

In the end, the inevitable Big Fight is quickly followed by the inevitable Moment of Personal Triumph. In this case, it's the toast-raising, if grudging and momentary, acceptance of Kallen by her rough-hewn peers during a fight-night after-party at — you guessed it — a red-walled Italian restaurant filled with boozy extras. Our heroine may have won her battles against the odds and male bigotry, but even in that moment of supposed emotional uplift *Against the Ropes* hardly lays a glove on us. ■