

Dutton's directorial debut solid in various facets

By Kam Williams
Sentinel-Voice

In the 1970s, Jackie Kallen abandoned a promising career as a well-respected sportswriter to start over in the world of boxing, first as a publicist, later as a manager and promoter. Despite being female, she managed to carve out her own niche in a macho bastion of male chauvinism comprised primarily of tough guys and underworld types.

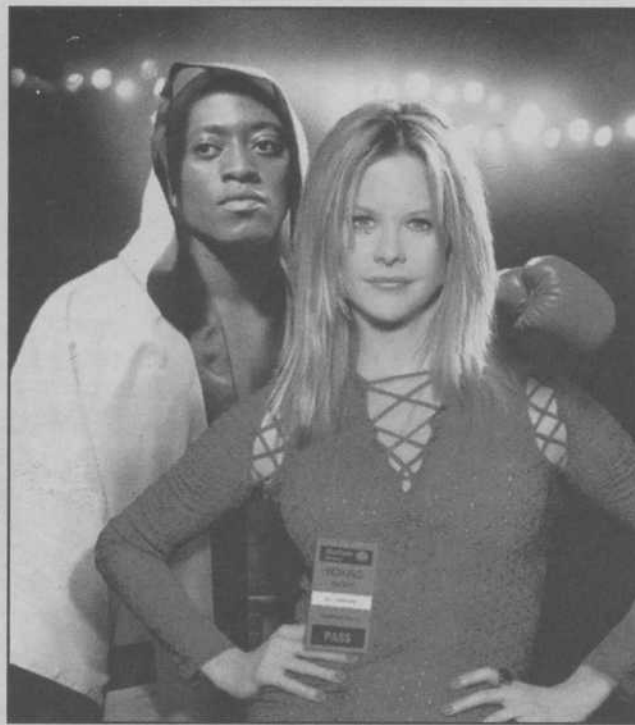
Ultimately, she reached tremendous success, guiding four of her pugilists to world titles, which makes her story a worthy subject for cinematic expression.

But "Against the Ropes," though an uplifting tale inspired by Kallen's triumphs, simply takes too many liberties with the facts to be considered a bona fide "biopic." For instance, much of Kallen's personal life has

been revised to transform this married mom into a coquettish sex kitten. Plus, she is falsely transformed into a gym rat who grew up around the fight game. In real life, however, she never studied the sweet science prior to adulthood.

Furthermore, instead of taking place in her hometown of Detroit, the picture emanates from Cleveland. The film, moreover, fails to make any mention of its heroine's subsequent triumphs over both breast cancer and heart disease. Also, nowhere to be seen are any of the colorful characters she represented or dealt with, like Tommy "Hitman" Hearn, James "Lights Out" Toney or Don King.

Instead, screenwriter Cheryl Edwards (Save the Last Dance) serves up only fictional figures imbued with



Omar Epps and Meg Ryan provide star power to "Against the Ropes," actor Charles Dutton's directorial film debut.

predictable personas that spring from her relatively conventional imagination.

Still, "Against the Ropes" represent a decent, big-screen directorial debut for actor Charles Dutton (Gothika), who cast Meg Ryan (In the Cut), against type as the brassy and she's-got-nerve

Kallen.

Omar Epps (Love & Basketball) co-stars as Luther Shaw, the street thug whose potential Kallen recognizes right after witnessing him pummel her own boxer to a bloody pulp in a crack house brawl.

Infused with equal doses of "Erin Brockovich" and "Rocky," the sappy plot unfolds at the crossroads of familiar "female empowerment" and "overcoming the odds" themes.

Director Dutton appears as the stereotypical, crusty, hard-bitten trainer coaxed out of retirement to whip one last champion-in-the-making into shape.

The cast is rounded out by Tony Shalhoub (of TV's Monk) as a ruthless mobster, Timothy Daly (Tyne's brother) as Jackie's love interest, Kerry Washington (The Human Stain) as Jackie's best friend and ring announcer Michael "Let's get ready to rumble!" Buffer as

his legally inimitable self.

Dutton's penetrating performance easily upstages the rest of his ensemble, especially Ryan who substitutes a Midwest accent and an assortment of tight outfits for acting. Flaws rest with the script. It is hard to expect anyone to infuse so much passion into a "by-the-numbers" boxing flick that telegraphs every punch.

In the end, nobody's the least bit surprised to see the progression from "Thanks for the bail, bitch," to "I'm living proof dreams still do come true," with all the usual demons exorcised, dragons slain and hurdles jumped along the way. A treat, if you somehow missed both "Rocky" and "Erin Brockovich." Otherwise, this film is mildly entertaining, but nothing new.

Good (2 stars). Rated PG-13 for crude language, brief sensuality, boxing and ghetto-style violence and drug use.

Handicapping the Oscars

Who deserves to win, will win, or will get overlooked

By Kam Williams
Sentinel-Voice

Unless the Academy is holding its cards close to the vest, there won't be much in the way of surprises on Oscar night, as far as the awards are concerned.

And unless non-indicted "nipple-gate" co-conspirator Janet Jackson crashes this affair to expose more of herself than she did at the Super Bowl, we'll have to be satisfied with a toned-down, G-rated fashion show at the annual Hollywood tribute to self-congratulation.

Though there's never any mystery about who gets the on-the-verge-of-death Lifetime Achievement Award (Blake Edwards in 2004), there normally is considerable suspense swirling around about who might win in most of the major categories. Not this year, however, as there are only prohibitive favorites. Expect a lot of ties in your office betting pool which means you must think carefully before guessing on the tie-breaking question, which typically reads, "How many minutes past midnight will the program run?"

So, without further fanfare, I present my picks, plus who deserved to win and who was unfairly overlooked entirely.

Best Picture: "Lord of the Rings 3" will win for the trilogy, though "Mystic River," number one on my Top 10 list, was easily the best film of the year.

Dissed: "Pieces of April," "Dirty Pretty Things" and "Love Actually."

Best Director: In a category generally paired with Best Picture, Peter Jackson (LOTR3) takes home a well-earned Oscar for his body of work, though I still say Clint Eastwood (Mystic River) is more deserving.

Overlooked: The brilliant directorial debuts of scriptwriters Peter Hedges' (What's Eating Gilbert Grape) with "Pieces of April" and Richard Curtis (Notting Hill) with "Love Actually."

Best Actor: Sean Penn (Mystic River) is

my choice and will prevail partially because he was cheated a couple of years ago when he didn't win for "I Am Sam." Sentimental favorite Bill Murray (Lost in Translation) will run a close second and Johnny Depp (Pirates of the Caribbean), a distant third. Among the ignored: Chiwetel Ejiofor (Dirty Pretty Things) along with routinely passed-over comic performances by Steve Martin (Bringing Down the House), Jim Carrey (Bruce Almighty) and Will Smith and Martin Lawrence, both for "Bad Boys 2" and Jack Black (School of Rock).

Best Actress: Charlize Theron (Monster) is a most-deserving shoo-in, since Diane Keaton (Something's Gotta Give) has won before, though Naomi Watts (21 Grams) should have been recognized a few years back for Mulholland Drive. Nothing comes close to Theron, though the work of Audrey Tautou (Dirty Pretty Things), Sanaa Lathan (Out of Time) and Charlotte Rampling (Swimming Pool) was quite commendable.

Best Supporting Actor: This is the only major category where the winner is in doubt, though Tim Robbins (Mystic River), my choice for the gold might falter, especially if his left-leaning politics have rubbed enough voters the wrong way. Then, it's up for grabs, with either Benin's Djimon Hounsou (In America), Puerto Rico's Benicio Del Toro (21 Grams) or Japan's Ken Watanabe ("The Last Samurai") taking home the trophy by virtue of Oscar jury nullification.

Best Supporting Actress: Rene Zellweger (Cold Mountain) wins because she's been edged out twice before, for Chicago and Bridget Jones' Diary. I'd say Patricia Clarkson (Pieces of April) was the best of this bunch though Marcia Gay Harden (Mystic River) and Holly Hunter (Thirteen) delivered stellar performances, too. Left out? How about Sarah and Emma Bolger, the real-life sisters who played siblings in Jim Sheridan's auto-

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