

Father, daughter clash in classy court drama

An estranged father and daughter are brought together — as opposing attorneys in a lawsuit — in "Class Action" (20th Century Fox).

Sparks fly when ambitious corporate attorney Maggie Ward (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio) leaps at the chance to defend a giant motor company in a class-action wrongful-death suit, knowing her father Jed (Gene Hackman) is counsel for the plaintiff.

She's never forgiven him for hurting her mother (Joanna Merlin) with his past philandering and spurns his idealistic defender-of-the-underdog practice.

As the trial begins, father and daughter are traumatized by the mother's sudden death.

Maggie's rabid determination to beat her father in public court and make partner in her law firm starts to crack when she concludes that the car company was at fault. Her predicament intensifies when she realizes her colleague and lover (Colin Friels) was part of the cover-up. While her career would be in ashes should she blow the whistle, cooperation would guarantee a partnership.

"Class Action" is one nifty courtroom drama, played with palpable conviction by the whole cast under smart direction by Michael Apted.

From the outset, the characters are emo-

tionally involving. Hackman's Jed is multidimensional — he loves his wife of 35 years, his feisty daughter and the disadvantaged, but he is badly flawed in both his personal and professional life. A consummate actor, Hackman seizes the role and gives it added depth and humanity.

With equal intensity Mastrantonio gives a full-blooded and satisfying performance, managing to be strong, tender and ultimately sympathetic as the calculating counsel.

Trenchant dialogue gives their public and private confrontations an added edge and keeps the gritty drama finely focused.

A half-dozen well-acted supporting roles all add texture and interest to the story.

While the plot itself is conventional, the ethical question of what price expediency at profit-hungry corporations is a valid one and absorbingly dramatized here. In the aftermath of junk bond dealers and savings and loan culprits, a reminder of the value of human life over the almighty buck is a welcome one.

Technical credits, especially the sleek cinematography around the San Francisco locale and taut editing, are first-rate.

It's not an action film, but "Class Action" is definitely a class act.

Because of restrained sexual innuendo and minimal rough language, the USCC classification is A-III — adults. The MPAA rating is R — restricted.

'Closet Land'

An intimate look at what secretly goes on under many governments today, "Closet Land" (Universal) shows the torture of individuals perceived to be a threat to the state.

An unnamed woman (Madeleine Stowe) in an unnamed country is dragged from her bed in her pristine white nightgown, blindfolded and hauled into an interrogation chamber.

A nameless man (Alan Rickman) then exhorts her to sign a confession. Her only "crime" is writing children's books; her current one is deemed politically subversive.

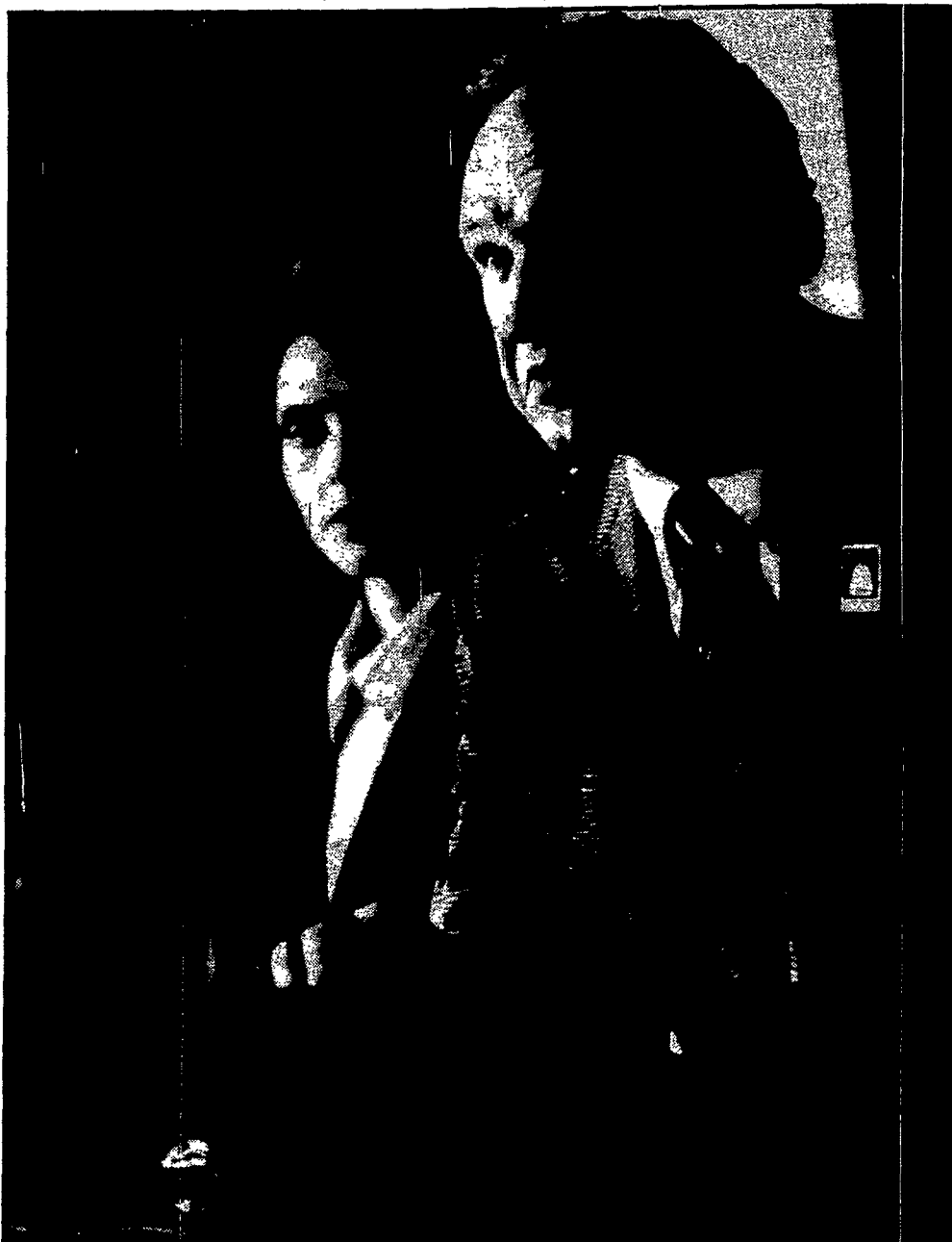
The incredulous young woman explains that she is totally apolitical and that her latest work is a simple story set in a closet where the clothes imaginatively come to life to entertain a little girl left there by her mother.

He is not convinced, and she will not sign a lie. And so the stage is set for a battle of wills in this harrowing movie that escalates from sinister psychological taunts through despicable physical torture to a hard-won triumph of the human spirit.

Radha Bharadwaj makes her screenwrit-



Knowing that her father is representing the plaintiff's wrongful-death claim, attorney Margaret Ward leaps at the chance to defend a giant motor company against a class-action suit.



Phil Brav/Twentieth Century Fox
For the plaintiff — civil-liberties lawyer Jedediah Tucker Ward (Gene Hackman); for the defense — ambitious corporate lawyer Margaret Ward (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio). Father and daughter wage opposite sides of an explosive legal battle in *Class Action*.

ing and directorial debut with this film, which is actively recommended by Amnesty International.

Its message — a worthy one — is that the torture of ordinary citizens is commonplace all over the world and should not be ignored. Unfortunately, the film probably will be ignored — except by very serious filmgoers.

It is an intense experience, with only two actors locked in one room. For this reason it often seems better suited to the intimate confines of a stage play.

Nonetheless, it's fairly well done. Rickman gives an engrossing performance of swift mood changes, sometimes fooling the blindfolded subject with other voices to keep her off-balance. By film's end when he realizes he can break her body but not her mind, one suspects he was once terrorized in the same room but had capitulated and turned tormentor instead.

The clashes in their personal relationship

at times is more convincing than the political situation they are swallowed up in.

As the victim-heroine, Stowe gives the film its uplifting note as she summons all her inner strength to bolster her resolve.

Production design is superior, getting the most from its one-room setting — a cold and boldly surrealistic blend of a harshly futuristic desk encircled by intimidating classical columns.

A central problem is the lack of immediacy and believability thanks to the lack of country and characters' names — an attempt to create a sense of universality. As a result "Closet Land" seems very distant and unreal.

Because of constant menace, a few depictions of torture and some sexual innuendo, the USCC classification is A-III — adults. The MPAA rating is R — restricted.

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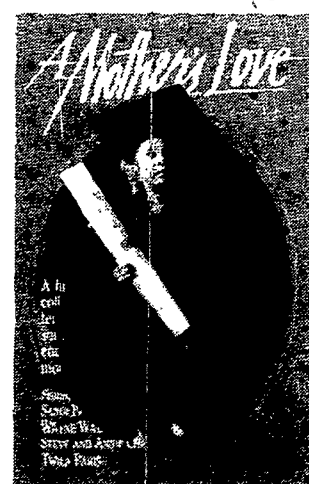
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