

RUSH & MOLLOY

By GEORGE RUSH and JOANNA MOLLOY

Ashley & beau cross betrothal line

Ashley Judd and race car driver-boyfriend Darlo Franchitti are shifting into high gear — they're engaged.

The couple, who haven't set a date yet, actually have been betrothed since December, but Ashley's mom, Naomi, just now saw fit to announce it.

Ashley, who gets abused by no-good boyfriends in her new flick, "Where the Heart Is" (which opens today), has taken a few spins around love's speedway in her 32 years. She has dated the likes of Michael Bolton, Lyle Lovett, Matthew McConaughey,

Robert De Niro and baseball player Rocky Anderson of the Baltimore Orioles.

But speed demon Franchitti has shown an ability for handling her curves. The two met at a wedding reception last May. According to one report, he broke up with his girlfriend of 18 months, model Kay McCann, shortly after the couple rented Judd's film "Kiss the Girls."

Whatever the truth, Judd and the 26-year-old Scotland-born Indy racer have been burning along nicely since then. He even got his beloved to sit behind the wheel in this month's celebrity Toyota Grand Prix. Franchitti was there for Ashley last year when a stalker posing as a police officer broke into her home in Franklin, Tenn., and she nursed him back to health at her home in February when he suffered a cracked pelvis and head injuries in a racing accident.

The actress has known heartache, though. When she was 25 and dating Bolton, she tells *Posse* this month, she read a pamphlet in her doctor's waiting room and diagnosed herself with "mild anxious depression." She says her physician later deduced she had "unresolved childhood grief."

"Nobody wants to be nailed to the cross as a bad mother," says Ashley, hinting that she had issues with her country singing sensation mom. She adds that the two still haven't "sorted it all out," but they've apparently made peace. They're due to appear with Ashley's sister, Wynne, on the May 17 CBS special, "The Judds: The Power to Change."

Anne, Ellen buzz

Let's see if Anne Heche and Ellen DeGeneres will also be getting hitched. In October the couple told a gay group in Vermont that they'd take their vows in the Green Mountain State when it legalized same-sex marriage.

Well, this week, Vermont's "civil unions" bill was passed into law.

A rep for DeGeneres told us yesterday that she had "no comment at this time" on whether she and Heche will make good on their promise. A friend of the pair, who live in California, points out, "They would have to establish residency in Vermont."

But you can bet there'll be buzz about their future this week-end in Washington, where Heche and DeGeneres are due to join Sunday's Millennium March for gay rights. Tomorrow, they'll speak at



Actress Ashley Judd and Scottish race-car driver Darlo Franchitti are in the last lap and heading for the nuptial checkered flag.

the "Equality Rocks" concert at RFK Stadium. Performers will include Chaka Khan, Melissa Etheridge, Kiki Lee and the Postboy Boys. Garth Brooks will do a duet with George Michael on the latter's "Freedom." That will be right after Michael introduces a short documentary he's financed.

Titled "Hiding Out," it's about gay teens living in "safehouses" after escaping from behavioral modification programs where their parents have sent them to straighten out.

The singer may also fund a longer film on the safehouses.

Men a threat?

CNN "Headline News" political analyst Michelle Mitchell almost became a headline herself the other day.

Mitchell recently went to Los Angeles to cover Vice President Gore's presidential campaign. Her mother, Linda, wanted to bring her freshly home-baked cookies. But trouble arose when money dealer called the Westin Century Plaza Hotel to make sure she had the right hotel.

After Moss asked several times whether the "Vesp" was expected, one suspicious staffer called the Secret Service. The agency checked its database and came upon another Mitchell who was a mental patient.

The security crisis was eventually unlightened out, daughter Michelle writes on Facebook.com, "but not before she had tied up the Secret Service for most of the night. God knows how many taxpayer dollars."



Richard Corbrey Daily News

Jula Roberts and her sister Lisa (above), were on the same wavelength yesterday when they joined the premiere crowd for "Frequency." Also at the Ziegfeld were Jennifer Lopez, in silk-up-the-side leather (l), "Frequency" stars Dennis Quaid and Elizabeth Mitchell (c) and Regis and Jay Phibin (below c), stepping out days after the game-show king underwent a procedure to unblock an artery in his heart.



Reporters who got wind of the snafu gave Michelle a round of applause when she stepped on the press van in the morning: "I was the only one whose mother had been officially designated a potential threat to national security."

Remizing

JAY LENO stood tall yesterday when he came to the dedication of his star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Leno picked the spot on the boulevard where, early in his career, cops twice detained him for vagrancy. —

MODEL KYLIE was didn't need much cajoling when Playboy asked her to pose. "I want

my children and grandchildren to see what I look like now," says the New Zealand starlet who promises that her full spread "will be a Kylie you've never seen before."

The blossoming actress also explains why she recently sat on the injured leg of New Jersey Gov. James Florio when posing for a party photo. "He asked me to," laughs Bax. "I guess he wanted to show how tough he is. Men are like that." —

STYLIST To the stars Philip Blush will take the stars next time — after getting his Dolce & Gabbana pants caught in an escalator Saturday night. "It was really scary," he told us.



Richard Corbrey Daily News

Kylie Baz, here with her boyfriend, New Jersey Gov. James Florio, did a very different kind of posing for Playboy.

end in Washington, where Heche and DeGeneres are due to join Sunday's Millennium March for gay rights. Tomorrow, they'll speak at



So Derek [L] showed she's still a "10" and then sees yesterday when she was honored at the ASPCA Bergh Ball at the Plaza. The 43-year-old actress, who rode bare and bareback in "Bohème," was cited for her support of humane conditions for the city's carriage horses. Derek continues to laugh off talk that she and billionaire Ted Turner are an item.



...and ...



The terror didn't end there. "I was going to a party uptown and had to go with a 6-inch hole in my pants."

PROSECUTOR BRUCE Breen, who works for the Bronx DA's sex-crimes unit, plays a public defender on NBC's "Law & Order: Special Victims Unit" tonight and May 12. Ray's director: "After putting some incredibly violent offenders away, it seems ironic that I'm trying to get them off on technicalities in the next two weeks."

SOME WELL-TRAINED deaths may be extracting teeth

Kashner helped the clerks serving California Pizza Kitchen to cancer-stricken kids at the Ronald McDonald House last night.

SHERLEY MACLAINE's fans will soon be able to channel the star on the Web. The otherworldly one will discuss her new book, "The Camino," about her spiritual pilgrimage through Spain, in interviews on sites like msnbc.com, yahoo.com, and cnn.com.

With Lisa Arcella and Karen Robinson

Kid-riled critic makes trouble in River City

John Simon can always be counted on to be irascible. Just ask the audience members who watched in horror as the curmudgeonly theater critic for New York magazine flew off the handle at a few children who were seated in front of him at Wednesday's preview of "The Music Man."

The trouble began when the 74-year-old Simon was seated in the orchestra section of the Neil Simon Theater directly behind a family with children. During the performance, the children became a little rambunctious and Simon asked them nicely to be quiet, according to eyewitnesses. Well, you know how kids are.

When the talking started up again, just as Rebecca Luker began singing the ballad "My White Knight" near the end of the first act, Simon dropped all pretenses of being nice.

"You don't bring kids to the theater," he blurted out loudly enough for everyone in the orchestra to hear him. "If you do, you're a jerk."

Heads turned all over the place as people looked their attention on the conductor, Luker, of course, kept on singing.

At intermission, Simon grabbed his belongings and was gone. Only later did witnesses realize that he had been given another seat, far from the kids.

A rep for the show confirmed the entire account. "Now everyone is too waiting for the other shoe to drop. Simon's vendetta on the ground."

TEMPEST IN A TEAROOM
Walter Laffley must be getting better. He's angry. The party owner of the Russian Tea Room was fuming yesterday over a report suggesting that all he had left in the kitchen at the swamped, 70-year-old restaurant.

Laffley denies the rumor, saying he is struggling because of lackluster food, lackluster service and troubles behind the scenes.

"It's a total lie," Laffley told me. "The restaurant is doing \$400,000 a week. The story said we had lost 500 seats. We've replaced cooks, heads, 150 staff. Because they weren't good enough. Business is booming."

He added that has not considered changes in the menu, such as adding downsize items like burgers. "I've never discussed hamburgers with anybody," he said.

But a rumor is whether 60-year-old Laffley, who is staying at home, will be replaced by a younger man. "I'm not sure," he said. "I'm not sure if there's a chef, you should know better."



And that was definitely Leo at Madison Square Garden on Wednesday, watching intently as the Knicks scouted by the Raptors. His Lakers cap gave him away.

Others A-listers spotted courtable or merely included: Sam Peckinpah, Jesse Jackson, Whoopi Goldberg, Chela Rock, Samuel L. Jackson, Rick Moranis, Jorge Posada and Tim Lincecum from the Yankees and Elizabeth Hurley, who came to the game with Ted Demme.

Hurley wore a T-shirt proclaiming "Pom Star in Training," and said it was her first basketball game ever.

BACK TO 'SQUARES' ONE IN N.Y.
Bruce Vilanch isn't any less funny on this coast. The "Hollywood Squares" regular and the man who writes the jokes for almost every TV awards show on the planet hit town this week to begin preview performances of his one-man show, "Almost Famous."

"Welcome to the only show in New York you don't go to high school," Vilanch said at the Westbeth Theater. "It's just been announced that Rosie O'Donnell has taken custody of Ellen DeGeneres."

Repeating one Oscar joke that never got on the air, Vilanch teased, "What do Peter Feends and George W. Bush have in common?"

"They both have serious fathers and both have serious mothers," he teased. "The '70s."

Vilanch's show opens to the public May 11, and he'll have a "celebrity" party hosted by Nathan Phillips.

FAMOUS? EPPS-OLUTELY!
Oscar Epps is really bigger than life. A billboard of the "Lone Star and Basketball" star wearing "Dad" duct tape now looms high above L.A.'s Sunset Blvd. He'll be coming down to Earth next week, when he begins shooting a movie in New York with director Michael Bay.

"The film, 'Perfume,' which also stars Paul Giamatti, Jeff Goldblum and Rita Wilson, is an improvisational piece on the fashion industry."

QUICK HITS
■ Forget Hollywood. Now there's a Harlem Walk of Fame, at 125th St. and Frederick Douglass Blvd. Right outside the Harlem USA Entertainment Complex. The first inductee is Duke Ellington, and his star goes on the sidewalk today. On hand will be granddaughter Mercedes Ellington.

■ Sony Pictures head Amy Pascal may not be losing any sleep over all the studio's troubles with the remake of "Charlie's Angels," but she definitely is losing sleep. Pascal and her husband, New York Times writer Bernie Weisskopf, just adopted a baby boy.

■ "Weekend Update" co-anchor Soledad O'Brien is pregnant. Her husband is investment banker Brad Raymond, and the child, due in October, will be their first. "The amazing thing is that my sister and sister-in-law are also expecting," says O'Brien. "So for my parents it's grandchildren number 10, 11 and 12."

With Lauren Rabie



WARNER LEROY

As for the... a long bout with... work...
TITANIC
PRESENCE AT THE GARDEN
You know it's a celebrity event when Leonardo DiCaprio is in the house.

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