

For New-Fashioned Romance, Click Here . . .

By ERIKA MILVY

WHEN last we saw Tom Hanks with Meg Ryan, they fell in love before ever setting eyes on each other.

"What if someone you never met, someone you never saw, someone you never knew was the only someone for you?" asked the advertisements for what seemed like a far-fetched fairy tale, "Sleepless in Seattle." Five years later, people are falling in love with strangers across a crowded chat room, and E-mail has woven itself into the fabric of our day-to-day lives, an adult equivalent of passing notes in grade school.

"You've Got Mail," the new romantic comedy opening on Dec. 18 from Mr. Hanks, Ms. Ryan and Nora Ephron, the trio who made "Sleepless in Seattle," close-focuses its camera on the care and feeding of an E-mail romance.

When the producer Lauren Shuler Donner set her sights on updating the 1940 classic "The Shop Around the Corner," she had an inspiration: we'll use E-mail, she said. In Ernst Lubitsch's film of Nikolaus Laszlo's Hungarian play, James Stewart and Margaret Sullivan are feuding co-workers who correspond in eloquent epistles unaware that each is the other's secret pen pal.

Nora Ephron, along with her sister and co-screenwriter, Delia, transformed this premise into "You've Got Mail." Speaking by phone from her apartment on the Upper West Side, Ms. Ephron said: "You couldn't

On line, they're calling

Nora Ephron's new

movie 'Sleepless in

Cyberspace,' as love

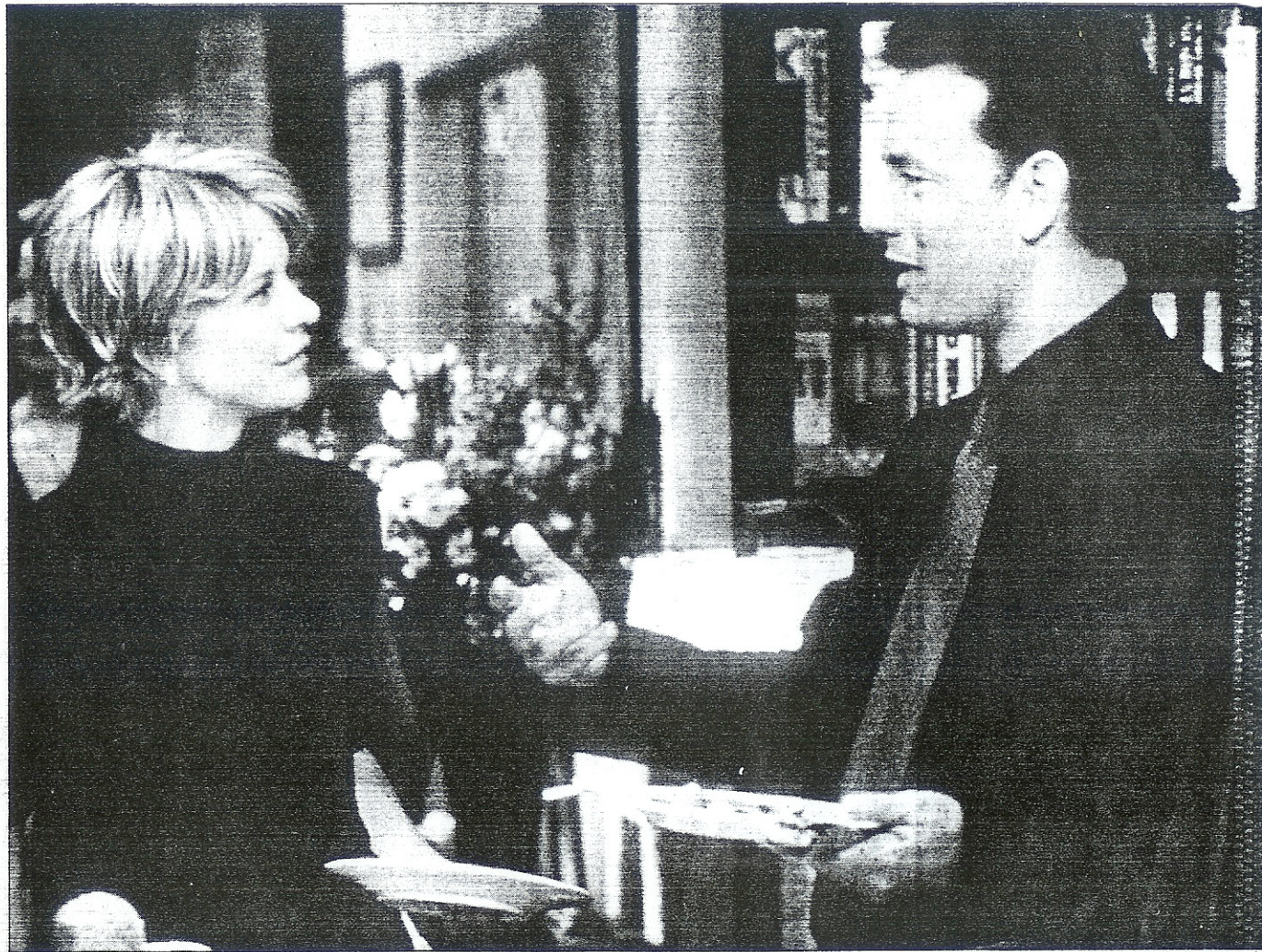
blooms in a chat room.

really have done this 10 years ago. In that era of the 20th century, when mail had ceased to be a means of communication, you couldn't really have done a new version of "The Shop Around the Corner." E-mail manages to bring back something that is old-fashioned."

"You've Got Mail" not only brings back something old-fashioned; it also seizes on the spirit of the times. Peopled with New Yorkers knocking back Starbucks lattes while bemoaning the malloning of America, the film encapsulates a late-20th-century ambivalence about progress and technology.

Joe Fox, played by Mr. Hanks, owns and operates a chain of cappuccino-brewing mega-bookstores whose comfy chairs beckon browsers to idle away an hour. When he decides to open a branch on the Upper West Side, the small children's bookstore nearby,

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Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks are enemies by day and E-mail buddies by night in "You've Got Mail," Nora Ephron's updated version of "The Shop Around the Corner."

owned by Ms. Ryan's Kathleen, is threatened with extinction. Inherited from her mother, the 40-year-old business, called the Shop Around the Corner, so defines Kathleen that her on-line pseudonym is Shoppgirl.

At the start of the film, Kathleen's boyfriend, a typewriter-collecting neo-Luddite played by Greg Kinnear, proclaims that the computer heralds the end of Western civilization: As soon as he is out the door, Kathleen hurries to her laptop with a rush of guilty pleasure. Next we hear the familiar song of modems connecting as she logs on to America Online: Kathleen has met a special

someone in cyberspace.

As trend-spotters have spotted, E-mail has, in its way, revived the lost art of romantic letter-writing. In the film, an elderly character reminisces about his correspondence with a former sweetheart.

"She had beautiful penmanship," he muses, reminding us of a now irrelevant virtue.

In electronic courtship, it is witty word-smithing that wins hearts. Mr. Hanks and Ms. Ryan are engaged in a meeting of minds without bodies.

Amorous E-mailers who have met in cy-

berspace "feel that their relationship grew from the inside out instead of the outside in, as face-to-face relationships do," said Esther Gwinnell, author of "Online Seductions: Falling in Love with Strangers on the Internet." She notes that such intimacy results from a feeling of security.

"You are in the safety of your own home," she said, "where you can sit around in your ratty bathrobe and bunny slippers. You don't have the kind of social anxiety that you would have meeting people in person."

Poring over her E-mail, Kathleen is enchanted by Joe's language. "I would send

you a bouquet of newly sharpened pencils if I knew your name and address," he writes. "On the other hand, this not knowing has its charms." Dr. Gwinnell acknowledges the charm: because the Internet offers virtually no information about a person, he or she becomes a "tabula rasa," she said.

"You are able to fill in all the blanks from your imagination and fantasy."

Sherry Turkle, author of "Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet," concurs. "E-mail raises the possibility of projection to a higher power," she said. "All

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