

Writing *Tommy Riley*

An Interview With J.P. Davis

by Rachel Wimberly

It's hard enough to get a movie made; but go ahead and try to write not only your first screenplay but also attach yourself to play the lead, and the odds are nearly impossible. Yet, that's exactly what J.P. Davis did more than five years ago when he wrote *Fighting Tommy Riley* and co-starred in the film which is due out in limited release May 6, 2005.

Fighting Tommy Riley is the story of a boxer (J.P. Davis) attempting a comeback and a trainer (Eddie Jones) who is haunted by the demons of his past. "They're two damaged souls who come together, and it builds them both up and then threatens to tear them back down," Davis says.

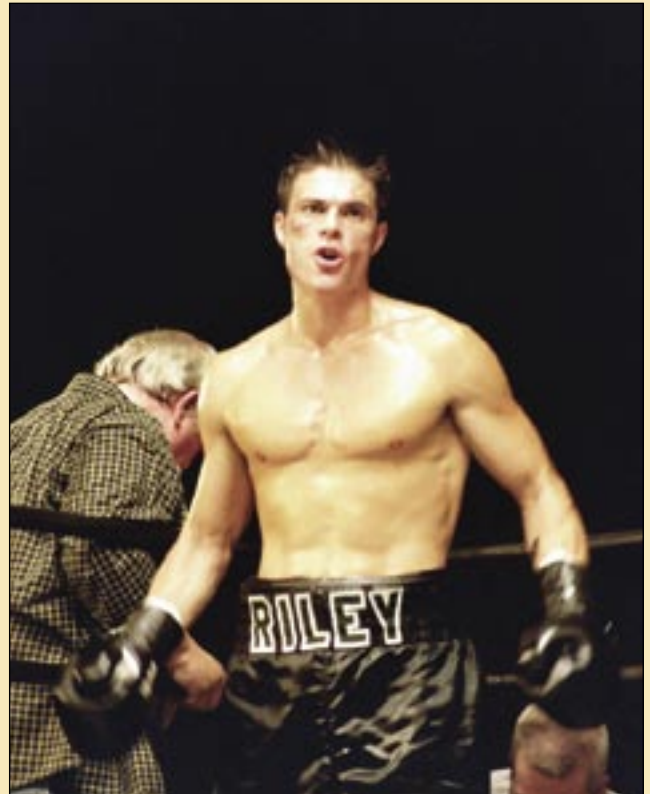
Davis was a struggling actor in New York when the seeds of the story were first planted. He wrote the character he plays, Tommy, as part of a 30-page monologue he performed in an "Off-off-Broadway theatre," as he describes it. The character, and the ensuing screenplay, is loosely based upon Davis' real-life experiences. "I looked at the audience afterward; and when you interact, you can tell when the audience is with you," Davis says. "People were crying at the end." Davis took the 30-page monologue, plotted out scenes and wrote a script: "I didn't know if the script was good; but I thought if I could get the movie in my head to match the script, it would be."

Even though it's a boxing movie with plenty of action sequences, the heart and soul of *Fighting Tommy Riley* is the relationship between the two main characters, Tommy and Marty. But, don't call the film "character driven." Davis says, "I think all pieces in the end are character pieces. Saying a movie is character driven is like saying a car has an engine. Without characters you don't have anything."

Davis never starts writing any dialogue until he knows the story inside and out and then how the characters fit into the story. "I think and think about the characters, and then I write notes. But then, once they start living in my head, it's a situation of putting them in the room. Tommy and Marty became so real to me," he says.

He wrote the first draft in five or six days; and then, through a friend of a friend, he found out where veteran screenwriter William Goldman (*Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid*, *All The President's Men*) lived and gave his script to Goldman's doorman with a note attached. "He read it and called me three days later," Davis says. "He told me I could really do this shit." At the same time, Davis passed the script around to anyone who knew anyone and eventually signed with one of the top literary agencies in Hollywood—Creative Artists Agency.

The first thing CAA wanted to do was get the script sold, but without Davis attached. "I said no. I wasn't going to sell it," he says. His agents told him that selling the script would make his career, but he wouldn't relent. Soon afterward he met an aspiring director, Eddie O'Flaherty, through a friend. "He immediately responded to [the script]," Davis says. The pieces fell into place further when *Fighting Tommy Riley* was submitted to Los Angeles-



J.P. Davis stars as Tommy Riley in *Fighting Tommy Riley*, which Davis also wrote.

based producer Bettina O'Mara, who was looking for someone to do a rewrite on another project. O'Mara hired Davis for the rewrite project, but they eventually decided to focus on getting *Fighting Tommy Riley* made instead.

Davis trained as a boxer for three years before the film was shot. "It's hard enough being an actor," he says. "Why act if you don't have to?" Their budget was tight (\$150,000), and once shooting began, everything almost fell apart numerous times. Davis recounts one particular instance in which one of the fighters didn't show up for a scene one day. "I didn't know this movie almost didn't make it," he says. "Eddie didn't tell me all these things that were going on."

Davis has some sage words of advice for anyone who might be considering making his own independent film: "If you're thinking about it, don't do it. You have to love it." **(i)**

RACHEL WIMBERLY has a master's degree in journalism from NYU and has written for CNN and a wide variety of magazines and newspapers. In 1998, she changed direction and went to work for producers Alan Riche and Tony Ludwig as their director of development. She worked on such films as *Deep Blue Sea* and *Family Man* before she decided to return to writing.

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