



Written by [Eric Egan](#) on October 10, 2010

Secretariat Entertains Despite Flaws

Secretariat, directed by Randall Wallace, opens with *Secretariat*'s owner, Penny Chenery, quoting a Bible verse from Job. In the verse, God speaks of the horse in vivid language that evokes images of power and majesty. He describes His creation as a proud and haughty beast whose stride "swalloweth the ground with fierceness and rage" and whose neck is "clothed with thunder." One could be forgiven for assuming that God was speaking of one horse in particular. With a stride that swallowed the ground at a gluttonous 25 feet and a neck that one Time reporter compared to a buffalo's, no horse epitomizes equinity quite like *Secretariat*.



In 1973, *Secretariat* became the first horse in 25 years to win the much-coveted Triple Crown of horse racing and simultaneously achieved two still-standing track records and a still-standing world record. He won the final race of the Crown, the Belmont Stakes, by a whopping 31 lengths. It should come as no surprise that a film should eventually be made about the thoroughbred's exploits. The only surprise should be that it has taken this long.

Secretariat is as much the story of Penny Chenery as it is of the horse that captured the imagination of a nation. The story begins with the unexpected death of Chenery's mother. Christopher Chenery, Penny's father, is all but a shell of his former self as a result of his dementia. Chenery's husband and brother pressure her to sell the farm, but Chenery has plans of her own. She intends to save the ailing Meadow Stables and make it the racing operation that her father had always dreamt it could be. Through a combination of a little luck and a little breeding theory, Chenery obtains ownership to the offspring of a mare named Something Royal and a stallion named Bold Ruler. The result of that union turns out to be a spirited young foal that, over the course of the film, develops into the finest equine to ever touch its hooves to turf.

The film's opening and subject matter mean that the film, like *Secretariat*, sets very high expectations for itself. For the most part, *Secretariat* lives up to these expectations but it does have its flaws.

The performances are all wonderful, which should come as no surprise considering the stable of tested talent that Wallace has in his employ. The film portrays Chenery as a woman who not only dares to chase her own dreams at a time when a housewife's dreams were expected to vary little from her husband's, but decides to chase a dream that is considered a domain of men. In the early 70s, women were not warmly received in the realm of The Sport of Kings. Lane successfully captures the essence of a woman whose fire and spirit rival that of the chestnut thoroughbred that she owns and yet retains her femininity. At no point does Lane's Chenery come off as cutthroat.

John Malkovich definitely steals the show with his portrayal of *Secretariat*'s outlandish French Canadian trainer, Lucien Laurin. Laurin is described at one point in the film as dressing "like Super Fly"



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with his brightly colored and clashing attire. This makes for some pretty entertaining outfits and provides the film with much-needed comic relief. Without Malkovich's acerbic and pessimistic Laurin, the film would simply be too sweet. And though Laurin is pessimistic, Malkovich ensures that he is always charming.

The flaws that keep *Secretariat* from living up to the potential suggested by the film's opening and subject matter stem from an issue with pacing. The reason that I was immediately drawn in by the film's opening is, in part, because I was fully expecting to feel the thunder of Secretariat's hooves pounding the track beneath his 1,100 pound frame and witness the awe-inspiring grace of a running machine swallow ground in copious amounts of slow motion. I was expecting to bask in the glory of the horse that seems to fit God's own example of his race. Unfortunately, Wallace never allows the camera to linger long enough on Secretariat.

There are moments that capture Secretariat's awesome power, to be sure, but they are too fleeting. Just as we begin to feel the hot breath emanating from the beast's burning belly and just as we begin to feel the thunderous power with which Secretariat's hooves beat the earth, Wallace cuts away. The film should have borrowed its rhythm from the horse's gait and the pulse-pounding excitement of the race. Instead, the film's rhythm feels borrowed from all too many Disney films that have come before it, and the film suffers a little as a result.

This being standard Disney fare, most of the supporting cast learn from Chenery's unwavering passion. The moments of epiphany, unfortunately, fall a little flat. In one instance, Chenery's husband, beleaguered for most of the film by his wife's insistence on being anything other than a model housewife, finally learns to "believe," in that generic sort of way that Disney characters usually do. As he tenderly caresses his wife's cheek at a pre-race ball, he informs her that she has taught everyone so much and that he too has learned something. Then he dances with his daughter while Penny looks on warmly, leaving us to wonder if what Mrs. Chenery taught her husband was not how to believe, but how to dance with his daughter. There is something missing in basic film syntax. A nice, pithy line full of wisdom accentuating his epiphany would have made for a much more inspiring scene.

Another instance of an avoidable mistake comes as Chenery is delivering an inspiring speech. Wallace, best known for penning the script of *Braveheart*, inexplicably focuses on Lane's back. Note to film makers: An actress' performance is far more effective if the audience can see her face. It is little things like this that keep *Secretariat* from reaching its full potential.

Yet, for all its drawbacks, *Secretariat* still manages to carry the spirit like a half-ton wave of muscle and sinew carries a diminutive jock wire-to-wire. *Secretariat* is good, clean entertainment for the whole family, and while it may lack Secretariat's astronomically large, 22-pound heart it's still more than worth your time.



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