

Blu-Ray Review: Silly ‘Secretariat’ Bolstered By Superb Extras

Submitted by [mattmovieman](#) [1] on February 3, 2011 - 3:38pm

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CHICAGO – There are few things more unsightly than a small-minded film that pats itself on the back for being enlightened. “Secretariat” is no more about a horse than “The Blind Side” was about a football player. Instead, both films revolve around insufferable, blonde, finger-wagging, pontificating heroines who confuse bold feminism with extreme self-absorption.

The fact both films are based on true stories is irrelevant to their inherent worth. With all the depth and nuance of a smarmy campaign ad, these films transform their remarkable source material into Bible-thumping celebrations of conservatism and Palin-esque Mama Grizzlies. “Secretariat” is such a derivative fusion of the “Seabiscuit” and “Blind Side” formulas that it occasionally plays like an “Airplane”-style parody.



Blu-Ray Rating: **2.0/5.0**

Diane Lane is a fine actress, but you’d never know it on the basis of her performance as Penny Chenery Tuohy—whoops, I mean “Tweedy.” With her mother gone and her father ailing, Mrs. Tweedy decides to take over her parents’ stables and turn their horses into champions. Scene after scene requires the headstrong Penny to put close-minded men in their place through a series of pointed speeches. Bullock brought a biting wit and impeccable sense of timing to these scenes that was effective (though hardly Oscar-worthy). Lane is woefully out of her element, utilizing high school theatre-level gesticulations that add excessive punctuation to every obvious syllable. When she quotes a Bible passage in the film’s mood-killing pre-title sequence, it sounds like she’s reading a book to her children, and that tone carries throughout her entire performance.

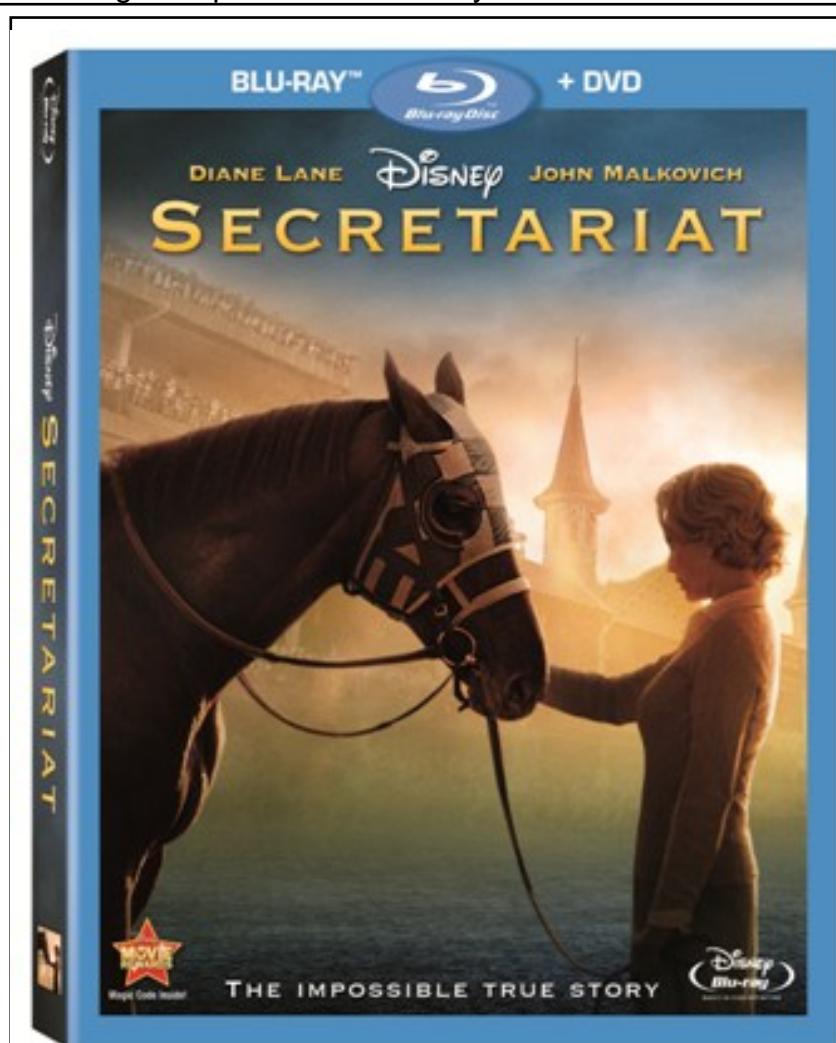


Diane Lane and John Malkovich star in Randall Wallace's Secretariat.

Photo credit: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment

John Malkovich fares no better as Lucien Laurin, the trainer whose penchant for breaking out into fits of French ranting is particularly jarring, since the film is so clumsily underdeveloped that it forgot to adequately establish the fact that he's French-Canadian. Lucien is only developed enough to be a "type": the washed-up trainer in need of another victory. There's also Miss Ham (Margo Martindale), the Ethel Mertz-like sidekick who spends the whole time grimacing at sexist remarks. And there's Ronnie (Otto Thorwarth), the jockey who draws attention to his short size with such consistency that the film might as well erect a neon sign over his head exclaiming, "Running Gag!" And, most unforgivably, there's Eddie (Nelsan Ellis), a black character straight out of the 1930s, ever-smiling and soulful, even as his words routinely fall on deaf ears. He even precedes a spiritual monologue with the line, "I don't know much about the makings of god, ma'am, but..."

Two scenes in the film bear a striking resemblance to "Blind Side." The first is Penny's silent pep talk with Secretariat on the race track, which is the wordless twin of the shameless Oscar bait sequence where Leigh Ann Tuohy (Bullock) gave Michael Oher the "Team is Your Family" lecture on the football field. Though Oher and the horse should be the stars of their respective pictures, they are consistently ignored, rendering their personalities utterly nonexistent.



Secretariat was released on Blu-Ray and DVD on Jan. 20, 2011.

Photo credit: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment

The other key scene is perhaps the most troublesome. In "Blind Side," Leigh Ann's friend gushes, "You're changing that boy's life!" Tuohy responds, "No, he's changing mine," despite the fact that her character never visibly changes throughout the entirety of the picture (except her ego does grow a few extra sizes by the end). In "Secretariat," Penny is approached late in the film by the husband and children she abandoned in order to pursue her own self-centered interests. Mr. Tweedy gushes, "You've taught your children what a real woman is," before adding, "and you taught me something too." And then he promptly leaves, as if a page of dialogue had slipped out of the script and the cast decided to just chug along.

"Secretariat" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 2.35:1 aspect ratio), accompanied by English, French, Spanish and Descriptive Video Service audio tracks, and includes a DVD copy of the film. There's a briskly paced, 15-minute featurette available on both discs that manages to be infinitely superior to the film itself, primarily because it allows the horse to be its central subject. The interviews with Penny Chenery and various members of her crew are so engaging, and the racing footage so astonishing, that it's clear the story should've been told in the form of a documentary. It's only in the supplemental footage that the horse's personality begins to emerge: the cockiness, the competitiveness, the awareness of the media (which is used in the film as a quickie sight gag). The more one learns about Chenery and Secretariat, the more obvious it is that this cinematic travesty did them both a gross disservice. Wallace introduces ten minutes of deleted scenes by stating his goal to "hone the script into the bare minimum of what it needs to be," resulting in a film full of caricatures rather than people and clichés rather than epiphanies.

The most intriguing special feature offers a multi-angle simulation of the 1973 Preakness, where four observers of the race—a jockey, reporter, historian and spectator—share their unique perspectives (which are recreated in animated clips). Their comments aren't always enlightening, though the combined interviews do a fine job of dissecting the legendary event. Best of all is Wallace's 21-minute interview with the delightful Chenery, where the filmmaker begrudgingly admits that elements in the film were fabricated. After viewing a scene where Penny coldly chastises Lucien and Ronnie for botching a race, Chenery says that she wouldn't have been so hard on the jockey, while offering a line of dialogue that would've better explained her character's reason for being so miffed. "I wish you had put that line in," Chenery laughs. Rounding out the extras are a music video by AJ Michalka (who also appears in the film as Lane's hippie daughter), a super-brief look at the complex process of recreating the historic races, and a director's commentary where Wallace admits that the film's opening Bible verse was inspired by advice given to him from friends in Mississippi. Of course, Wallace played a small part in that decision. When his friends inquired

about the film’s plot, Wallace answered, “It’s about god whispering in the ear of a horse.” How does he know Secretariat wasn’t an atheist?

‘Secretariat’ is released by Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment and stars Diane Lane, John Malkovich, Margo Martindale, Dylan Walsh, Nelsan Ellis, Otto Thorwarth, James Cromwell and Fred Dalton Thompson. It was written by Mike Rich and directed by Randall Wallace. It was released on Jan. 20, 2011. It is rated PG.



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