

Diane Lane a Champion in Literal Horse Opera 'Secretariat'

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – In real life, we cling to the notion that the inconceivable can happen, that magical probability can penetrate the mendacity of everyday existence, but it rarely if ever happens. That is what makes the new film "Secretariat" so appealing, that 37 years ago the impossible did happen, through the heart of a horse and his believers. Diane Lane and John Malkovich lead the charge.

Secretariat is the horse that won the Triple Crown of racing (Kentucky Derby, Preakness, Belmont Stakes) back in 1973, and did it in a fashion that has yet to be equalled. Although it seems that everyone would know this story, the power of the achievement had been lost, until this film found it again. With the feel (complete with wooden dialogue) of a 1940s studio film, Secretariat brings together the characters, settings and drama that only a true story can muster.

Diane Lane is Penny Chenery, heir to a horse breeding and training stable run by her father (Scott Glenn). When her mother dies and her father is too ill to run the business, outsider Penny is determined to learn enough to keep the operation going. After a fallout with the trainer on site, she seeks out an outsider named Lucien Laurin (John Malkovich) to take over.

Two of the stable's pregnant mares are about to give birth. Per an old agreement with one of her father's partners, Ogden Phipps (James Cromwell), Penny must flip a coin to determine which of the potential newborns – with the blood lineage of a former champion named Bold Ruler – will go to which owner. Even though she loses the toss, she gets the horse she wants. Rearing up straight out of the womb, the horse that would be Secretariat is immediately dubbed Big Red.



Getting the Gold: Diane Lane as Penny Chenery and John Malkovich as Lucien Laurin in 'Secretariat'
Photo Credit: John Bramley for © Disney Enterprises

With debts on the farm looming after her father's death, Penny puts Big Red into the lucrative racing circuit, and the newly named Secretariat begins to rack up wins in the preliminary races leading to the Triple Crown, especially after the training team becomes anchored by jockey Ron Turcotte (Otto Thorwarth). After Penny secures more funding by selling risky breeding rights, including to her coin toss buddy Phipps, the Secretariat team focuses on the Kentucky Derby and beyond.

What happens in that Triple Crown pursuit is nothing short of amazing, in an age when the three races had not been won in 25 years. In the post-Vietnam and Watergate era of 1973, it was a horse named Secretariat that became the world's greatest living athlete.

The reason this film works, despite some clichés in the characters and the aforementioned clunky dialogue, is that the wonder of this momentary phenomenon is so richly and emotionally presented. Even though the results are known, to experience the power and passion of the build up to the last leg of that 1973 Triple Crown, makes the sheer overwhelming result of that historic Belmont Stakes that much more resonant.

The performances of the lead actors contributes crisply to the atmosphere. Diane Lane as Penny is the perfect wealthy matriarchal horse owner, all permed hair and subtle understatement. Even though she is asked to talk to the horse, almost Mr. Ed style, she pulls it off somehow. John Malkovich gets to chew some scenery as trainer Lucien, and represents all the pessimism that the sport has to offer. And Kevin Connolly ("Entourage") adds a nice Greek chorus touch in his role as a skeptical race reporter.

The direction, by Randall Wallace, is lush in scenery and appropriately oriented towards the climatic races. The multiple points-of-view presented, especially from the position of a actually being on one of those beasts during a race, is thrilling. Also effective was showing the second race, the Preakness, primarily through its television coverage. Not only does it showcase Penny's family participating in it at home, but highlights the fact that most of the country at the time absorbed the major sporting events that way. In an age of 24/7 sports, there was a veiled innocence to a family gathered around the tube for a horse race.



Horse of the Hour: Otto Thorwarth as Jockey Ron Turcotte rides 'Secretariat'
Photo Credit: John Bramley for © Disney Enterprises

The race sequences, with use of slow motion, unique track angle coverage and notable sound design – the mix of thundering hoofs, crowd noise and the oxygen strain of the horse itself – creates a deeply felt environment. This film is composed to be a literal "horse opera" (the old term for cowboy movies), promoting the heroic Secretariat to Mount Olympian heights in a context of groovy 1970s threads.

There were some questionable moments, such as a side story about Penny's daughter participating in Vietnam War protests (about three years too late), but fortunately it didn't mar the main story. The screenplay adds flourishes within the narrative as well, that come to climax during the final race, including an effective use of a bible passage. There was religious overtones to the miracle of Secretariat, and for once it didn't seem too much.

In one of the many platitudes expressed in the film, a characters exclaims "impossible," while gazing upon the glory of Secretariat. This is a valentine to a certain time and place when something not possible did occur, spurred on by a red hued horse and a country that wanted to believe in him.

"Secretariat" opens on October 8th everywhere. Featuring Diane Lane, John Malkovich, Scott Glenn, James Cromwell, Fred Thompson, Kevin Connolly and Otto Thorwarth. Screenplay by Mike Rich, directed by Randall Wallace. Rated "R." [Click here](#) [16] for the

HollywoodChicago.com interview of Diane Lane and John Malkovich of Secretariat. [Click here](#) [17]for the HollywoodChicago.com interview of Director Randall Wallace of Secretariat.



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