

## TV Review: ABC's 'Secret Millionaire' Highlights Great People While Manipulating Viewers

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on March 6, 2011 - 9:32am

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CHICAGO – What has happened to Sunday nights? Perhaps the most bizarre modern trend in television is the desire for a good cry at the end of the weekend. People watch hard-working men and women finally get their due on “Undercover Boss” or shed a tear at the reshaped lives of “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition.” The latest entry in this manipulative sub-genre is ABC’s “Secret Millionaire,” a program that certainly highlights deserving people but does so in a way that doesn’t quite work.



TV Rating: **2.5/5.0**

The concept of “Secret Millionaire” is not unlike “Undercover Boss” in that it’s basically a charity program built around subterfuge. (Although, to be fair, the show is not only based on an older UK program but actually aired on FOX in December of 2008 before jumping networks a few years later.) Instead of CEOs, the show features a millionaire, and instead of going into the lower levels of a corporate structure, they’re dipping below the poverty line to learn lessons about giving back and find worthy places to which to donate. The millionaire tells people at soup kitchens and other volunteer organizations that he or she is working on a documentary about giving back and is actually forced to live with very little for a week.



Secret Millionaire  
Photo credit: ABC

And here’s where the show gets weird. Why force the millionaire to live on a limited budget and in a housing project? If the subject needed to learn a lesson than it makes a bit of sense, but the “star” of the first episode is an inspirational author/speaker who grew up below the poverty line herself. She advises people on how to get out of their tough situation. Why does she need to survive on \$40 a week? It’s a gimmick.





Secret Millionaire  
Photo credit: ABC

And too much of "Secret Millionaire" feels like a gimmick. I'm all for giving back and very few of us do it as much as we could or should but should we turn the plight of the poor into Sunday night entertainment? We all should volunteer and give back but that doesn't make the subject a good one for an ABC program. Can't we find a way to learn about The Love Kitchen, an inspiring soup kitchen in Knoxville, that doesn't feel manipulative?

I suppose one would argue that the "concept" of "Secret Millionaire" is the hook and that the moral message of the piece should be the focus. Everyone you meet on the premiere of "Secret Millionaire" seems like a good person and the show teaches an important lesson. I just wish it didn't do so in a way that made me feel like I was being emotionally manipulated. When the child with Leukemia popped up in the premiere, it was just too much. Call me old-fashioned, but I don't like when the plight of children is used to produce ratings to make money. It's just a little dirty.

It's also worth noting that the fact is that we don't know what's real and what's not on reality TV and some parts of "Secret Millionaire" feel scripted. If not totally written, at least produced in which people are advised to talk about certain things. There were even scenes that I would swear to you felt like they weren't the first take. They just don't all seem natural. There's a painting scene in the premiere that sounds like something out of a movie. People don't talk like this naturally. At least not on the first take or without a little prodding about what to mention.

Ultimately, the entire concept is a bit too much of a script. I want people to learn about The Love Kitchen and, as a society, we definitely need to value the people highlighted on this show more than we do, but I couldn't shake the feeling that "Secret Millionaire" was closer to "reality TV" than actual "reality." And that's a crucial difference.

*"Secret Millionaire" debuts on ABC on Sunday, March 6th, 2011 at 7pm.*



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