

Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 29 July 2003 18:00

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SEABISCUIT

Seabiscuit arrives as such a breath of fresh air – an inspirational period piece in a sea of noisy, formulaic action drivel – that you wish to God the movie was better than it actually is.

For many audiences, *Seabiscuit* will be exactly what the doctor ordered: an earnest, uplifting tale of underdogs who end up big winners, a true story of American pluck and determination. And don't get me wrong: The movie isn't bad. Working from Laura Hillenbrand's well-regarded nonfiction *Seabiscuit: An American Legend*, this tale of the little racehorse that could is sturdy and intermittently effective. Yet I can't be alone in feeling that director Gary Ross has gone to such lengths to make something well-meaning and noble that everything in it comes out rather bland. Ross' direction is thuddingly obvious, and his emphasis on the spirit and flag-waving sincerity of "the little guy" (exemplified by Randy Newman's lump-in-the-throat score and the script's banal speechifying) makes it appear he has his eyes set on the first Nobel Prize in filmmaking.

Seabiscuit

is almost unbelievably sincere. It's also, except for its racing sequences, more than a tad dull.

There's precious little surprise in the film, and that extends to the casting. As Seabiscuit's owner, Charles Howard, Jeff Bridges reprises his huckster-with-a-heart-of-gold portrayal from *Tucker: The Man & His Dream*, and as the horse's trainer, Chris Cooper revisits his laconic cowpoke from

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Lonesome Dove
and
Lone Star

; both actors are fine, but we've seen these performances before. Tobey Maguire is the movie's standout as jockey Red Pollard, investing his usual reticence with internal rage, and William H. Macy has some fun as a gimmick-laden radio announcer, but all of the film's performers are hampered by Ross' pokiness and lack of imagination;

Seabiscuit

, with its standard two-shots and predictable staging, has the generic look and feel of a TV movie. (Ross occasionally threatens to be visually inventive, as during an under-illuminated, nighttime track practice, but just as quickly gives up.) The movie has little texture – its one "bad guy," the owner of the racehorse War Admiral (Eddie Jones), is a piggy stereotype – but a lot of heart, and that heart might be enough to convince audiences that

Seabiscuit

is a masterpiece. I thank Ross and company for the effort, but I remain unconvinced.



LARA CROFT TOMB RAIDER: THE CRADLE OF LIFE

Call me a quitter, but I'm fast running out of things to say about this summer's endless run of action-blockbuster wannabes (especially when, as with last week's *Bad Boys II*, they're sequels to movies I disliked in the first place), so here are a few random thoughts about the unfortunately punctuated

Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life

: The film is a little easier to sit through than 2001's

Lara Croft: Tomb Raider

because, bizarrely plotted though this one is – it involves the retrieval of the actual Pandora's Box (!) – at least it's not completely incoherent, and the movie's final third features some beautiful shots of the African landscape. Angelina Jolie is as game as ever, but she can't overcome the role's stiffness or humorlessness. (Her decision to play the role as

less of a cartoon this time isn't exactly a wise one.) Fine actors such as Noah Taylor and Djimon Hounsou have nothing to do. Some sequences, such as the one in which Lara, in blatant disregard of all laws of underwater physics, punches a shark in the face, are so ridiculous that they elicited audible groans from the audience; director Jan de Bont should have just gone the *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle*

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route and made the whole enterprise

joyously

ridiculous. The action scenes are tame and repetitive. The sets all look uncommonly like sets. The stunts are great. The visuals are not. It's your money.



LAUREL CANYON

It's a testament to the unassailable coolness of Frances McDormand that she can co-star in a movie with Christian Bale, Kate Beckinsale, and Natascha McElhone and *still* come off as the sexiest one onscreen. In Lisa Cholodenko's comic drama

Laurel Canyon

, new to video and DVD after an art-house run this spring, Bale and Beckinsale play a betrothed couple who move to California while doctor-to-be Bale performs his residency in a psychiatric hospital; McDormand plays Bale's aging-hippie, record-producer mother, who invites the pair into her home, and whose free-spirited ways have an all-too-liberating effect on Beckinsale's tightly wound research scientist. The events that occur – Beckinsale falls under McDormand's spell while Bale engages in a flirtation with McElhone's fellow medical resident – feel a little programmatic, but

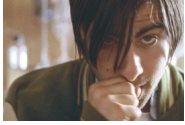
Laurel Canyon

maintains a lovely air of melancholy and yearning; the movie's tone suggests what it would be like if you realized your life had turned into a sitcom that wasn't all that funny. Cholodenko's casting of the three young leads, and the performances they give, are inspired – Bale and Beckinsale, both British, play Americans here, and the Scottish McElhone plays a German, and this nationality-swapping enhances the film's themes of disorientation and ambiguity – but it's McDormand who really makes

Laurel Canyon

something to see. Fierce, proud, wickedly funny, and effortlessly touching, McDormand displays a hard-won radiance that's enormously appealing; in a movie year in which great roles have been in criminally short supply, McDormand has what may be 2003's best so far, and gives a performance to match.

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SPUN

McDormand achieves her effects so subtly that the power of her portrayal comes as something of a shock; by contrast, the performers in the new-to-video drug comedy *Spun* work so hard at being "edgy" and "raw" that it becomes difficult to even look at them. By their very nature, drug-addict roles are catnip to actors, allowing them free reign to deliver blatantly over-the-top characterizations; it takes a truly assured director, such as

Requiem for a Dream

's Darren Aronofsky, to give their performances a context and keep their wilder impulses in check.

Spun

's helmer, Jonas Akerlund, has borrowed liberally from Aronofsky's drug masterpiece, especially in the editing rhythms and close-ups (there are numerous shots of dilating pupils), but he's overly wowed by his cast's frenzied, go-for-broke emoting. Even though the movie is a comedy, albeit a rather gruesome one, the amphetamine-fueled histrionics wear down your patience; you know a film is out-of-control when that insane preppie Jason Schwartzman gives the most sustained performance. As for the rest, you get Brittany Murphy doing her smudgy-eyed child-whore number, John Leguizamo furiously masturbating into a sock, Mena Suvari with obscenely rotting teeth, Patrick Fugit with connect-the-dots acne, Peter Stormare and Alexis Arquette as drugged-up cops, and a mini

Pope of Greenwich Village

reunion between Mickey Rourke and Eric Roberts, and these characters are all so obnoxious that you pray for them to OD as quickly as possible. The film, as it should, moves along zippily, but a director with some subtlety, and one who encouraged it in others, would have made

Spun

more than a mere speed-freak show.