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Film Review

Seabiscuit by Gary Ross

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Feature films are collective projects, compromised outcomes of art and opportunity, ideals and egos, messages and money. They reflect essentially the moment in which they are made, however enticingly they depict the period in which they are set. *Seabiscuit*, the 2003 film directed by Gary Ross and based on the best selling history of a racehorse, by Laura Hillenbrand, starts in 1910, revisits the dark hardships of the Depression period, and rides forward into the bright optimism of the New Deal. Some introductory background voice-over by acclaimed historian David McCullough, who narrated the Public Broadcasting System's "The American Experience," rings with documentary seriousness.

Seabiscuit is a symbolic hero, the lynchpin of a three part composition of classic American main characters. Charles Howard is a can-do self-made mechanical wizard and entrepreneur who makes a million when autos replace the horse and wagon; Tom Smith is a quiet over-the-hill lonesome cowboy type of unknown background given to saving and nurturing damaged horses. His tag line is "Don't throw a life away just 'cause it's banged up a little." (Tucker meets Shane.) Red Pollard is a sensitive, slender, conservatively brought up family oriented youth, disadvantaged, teased and taunted. (Think of Edward Scissorhands).

The Depression draws the threads of these three unrelated lives together. Charles loses his young son in an ironic car accident, Red loses his family who can no longer feed him and send him to an employer in exchange for maintenance, and Tom camps out in woods and fields in growingly familiar scenes of the down and out. They converge - owner, jockey, and trainer - around the unlikely champion Seabiscuit. Through effort and ingenuity, Seabiscuit is shaped into a champion, his attitude tuned to success.

The racing scenes are extraordinary filmic achievements, visually, powerfully and viscerally affective. The anticipatory build-up to these

scenes, the vested interests of varieties of people in the success of this unlikely little horse, this underdog, has rarely been handled as well in traditional racehorse stories. Seabiscuit is not personified. He's never ready for his close-up. (Ten different horses were used for his role). He takes on the role of abstract winner for his three mentors and for the economically deprived American populace as well. They are represented in well-composed black and white stills, shots of families clustered around big old-time radios, and rows of rooting fans.

Competition off the track, to arrange a race against Triple Crown Winner and Eastern Champion War Admiral, brings in two stock cultural concepts: the stereotypical image of the east coast as rich and powerful in contrast with the virtuous down-home rest of the country, and the caricature of the big-time power broker as a literally heavy villain. Media takes a hit, in the person of radio announcer Tick-Tock McGlaughlin, played by William H. Macy as a whiskey guzzling buffoon in intermittent short scenes whose voice-over addition to the narrative, funny if considered as a free-standing routine, is not worth the disruptive effect of its tone and rhythm. Bring back McCullough!

People take heavy blows from fate: economic ruin, death of a child, divorce, partial blindness, and debilitating injury. Ultimately they achieve victory through cooperation. This is definitely a feel-good movie, a metaphor of the victory of ideal values in the face of bad times, which tells a story larger than the Depression and addresses the needs of the American current moment.