Three men and a horse

reviewed by Steve A. Vineberg in the August 23, 2003 issue

For the first half-hour you can't imagine how *Seabiscuit* is ever going to get out from under the truly awful ideas that writer-director Gary Ross has inflicted on it. Ross, whose last film was the clumsily sentimental fable *Pleasantville*, begins by giving a mythic overlay to the story of the celebrated Depression-era racehorse, an unlikely champion because of his puny size and his early rebellious nature.

The historian David McCullough provides a rambling voice-over narration that offers familiar images of '30s destitution and truisms about hope battling despair. Meanwhile Ross moves the three protagonists--Charles Howard (Jeff Bridges), the automobile manufacturer whose only child dies in a car accident; the erstwhile jockey Red Pollard (Tobey Maguire), whose itinerant parents abandon him tearfully when he lands his first (adolescent) job, as a stable hand; and the laconic westerner Tom Smith (Chris Cooper), who has an unerring instinct for horses--toward one another in a blocky, graceless fashion. The only agenda that seems to govern this lengthy opening section is the impulse to make a big, Oscar-worthy picture.

But then the story begins to seep through. It's the one Laura Hillenbrand told in her best seller, but that Hollywood, incredibly, hasn't gotten around to before (you can't count the fatuous 1949 *The Story of Seabiscuit*, with Barry Fitzgerald as the horse's invented Irish trainer and Shirley Temple as his dimpled granddaughter). The faith of these three men in a horse that was bred as a loser (though his father was Hardtack and his grandfather the great Man o' War) and Howard's faith in his eccentric, homespun trainer and his oversized, eruptive jockey surmount a set of obstacles so daunting that it's easily the stuff of legends. So is the animal, not because of his extraordinary beauty--the characteristic of most great movie horses, like The Pie in *National Velvet* and The Black in *The Black Stallion*--but because of his unlikeliness as a champ. When Seabiscuit, trained in the west and thus emblematic of a natural, roughshod spirit, defeats the eastern mount War Admiral, winner of the Triple Crown, the movie swells with feeling.

It isn't that the voice-over disappears entirely once the narrative takes hold (though it does become gratifyingly infrequent), or that Ross stops trying to paint The Big Picture. But it's easy to slough off the movie's flaws once Ross demonstrates that he has dramatic instincts and that he knows how to shape scenes around his actors, all three of whom are cast perfectly.

Cooper is perhaps too well cast; in some scenes he overdoes the Wilford Brimley wise-old-codger bit, though most of the time he's very fine. And Bridges, rather studied in the pictorial early scenes, grows into the role of Charles Howard: he has a wonderful moment when he gives a rousing speech to a crowd from the back of a train, making a virtue of Seabiscuit's shortcomings and those of his team.

Maguire is superb as the jockey. The screenplay makes too much of Pollard's brooding and eternally spoiling for a fight, which stem from his unresolved anger over his parents' disappearance from his life. But Maguire internalizes those qualities and makes them dramatically feasible. There's never a moment when you don't believe in Red's volatility or his solitariness or his penchant for quoting Shakespeare. And, in smaller roles, Gary Stevens (as the famous jockey Georgie Woolf, known as The Iceman) and William Macy (as the hilarious grandstanding sports announcer Tick-Tock McGlaughlin) make sharp impressions.

Ross's trumpeting of Seabiscuit's tale as the great story of the Depression is silly because it's obvious. You cringe at a line like Red Pollard's "We didn't fix [Seabiscuit]; he fixed us" because it suggests that Seabiscuit cured the Great Depression. But it would be folly to deny that he eased its pangs a bit, or that he represented the improbable actualizing of the dreams of a country full of underdogs. Similarly, you cringe at Randy Newman's overwrought musical score because you're already feeling the feelings that he's determined to wring out of you.

But those excesses don't ruin the movie, which is grounded in a terrific story (and a true one), and in performers who understand how to make their characters embody the emotions in it. Ross must believe all the stuff in that fraudulent voice-over; he wrote the script. What redeems the movie is that he believed more strongly in his actors.