

THE BLACK STALLION

Directed by Carrol Ballard
Produced by Fred Roos and Tom Sternberg
Distributed by United Artists
Released in 1979

Anyone shipwrecked on a desert island has a rare opportunity to get his mind right. It's all very clarifying. Life is survival, and life is purpose. In *The Black Stallion*, young Alec Ramsey is lost at sea when his passenger ship goes down in flames. A giant black horse saves his life. Now, with nothing but a pocket knife (symbol of survival) and a figurine of Bucephalus (symbol of purpose), he sets out on a whole new way of living. Seaweed, fire, and shelter ensure survival. Then, with no prospects of deliverance, he turns to the horse, a beautiful beast of kindness and fury.

His father, heroic in his calm and his selfless strength (killing the Arab who threatened his son, then, with his last gesture, tossing him the life jacket) is gone. There's no way to know if he will soon join him, no way to know if he'll ever be rescued. But...he will *live*.

They have nothing, but can enjoy their time together, for however long is left. So Alec realizes that he's not living to survive, but living with a purpose. And once he is, miraculously, rescued, and his survival is a sure thing, he carries that new-found purpose forward. He will honor the horse that saved his life, that became his only hope, by showing the world that he is the fastest anywhere. Alec will remain anonymous. The Black will have all the glory. His mother never found that sense of purpose, so all she can think of is the risk to Alec's life and the prospect that she'll be abandoned to this world. For Alec there's no hesitation. He's already looked death in the face, so now he can get on with living.

And this is where our thought-provoking film really perplexes. The match-race is a stunning come-from-behind victory. But through score and editing we're taken back to the island, an anti-climactic parenthesis that continues through the entire closing titles. Is this a reminder that Alec was warned that The Black must be free? Is this Alec longing for the solitude and uncomplicated joys of those halcyon days when he didn't have to share his horse with anyone? The last shot of the film-proper is of The Black, harness-free, staring inscrutably ahead while his adoring master gazes rapturously from below. Why, on the heels of such a triumph, are we confronted with such a tenuous, melancholy denouement?

Life is full of disappointments, and the worst disappointments are the hard-fought victories that turn to ash. From this new vantage point, on the other side of success, we feel different about where we were, and what we were, before undertaking the quest.

Today is always uncertain, tomorrow a vague promise. But yesterday is true. It is done. It is safe. Even if it is painful, yesterday reassures because it is what it is, no more, no less. That's why nostalgia is such a friendly trap. We don't know what the events of today will lead to—even good things can have dark unintended consequences. But we can trust in yesterday, because we know how it turned out. It's looking at the 1950s and seeing one car in the garage, two happy parents, and three squares a day, longing for that stability and simplicity, forgetting

that every day the Bomb could drop and punctuate the last sentence of that carefully scripted life.

What if Alec, now safe, and back in his spacious home, being served dinner by his pretty mother, longs for the island? He had not a care in the world, 'cause there wasn't a thing he could do about it. There was nothing he could do to save himself.

So he just lived.

It all seems idyllic. But he was facing death—exposure, cobras, drowning—every day. Everything turned out fine, so, incredibly...he might actually want to go back.

It's easy to want things to be simple. It's easy to idealize the past. It's easy to have no responsibilities.

But we have to find our purpose and we have to move forward. And maybe even Alec struggles—Alec, whom, despite his youth, seems to have a better handle on life than most 50-year-olds. Through a fluke combination of intrinsic courage and harrowing experiences he's found his purpose. Yet still he wrestles to define his existence. For it's one thing to travel, and it's another to arrive. He's got to put some very difficult things in their proper perspective before he can really come home. Robert Browning's uncommon words from "Rabbi Ben Ezra" encapsulate the paradox with a heartfelt challenge:

Then, welcome each rebuff
That turns earth's smoothness rough,
Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand but go!
Be our joys three parts pain!
Strive, and hold cheap the strain;
Learn, nor account the pang; dare, never grudge the throe!

When his mother tells him that she cannot countenance him riding in "that *horse race*," Alec doesn't argue, doesn't lash out, doesn't demonstrate in any way. It appears he is willing to accept her authority and let it go.

His maturity is all-encompassing.

The birds sing outside, just beyond the open window. She feels guilty about her decision. Wanting to fill the silence, she asks about the figurine in his hand. "Alexander the Great's horse," he says. She proceeds to examine it with equal parts curiosity and consideration for her tender, introspective son. "Mm...Dad g-gave it to me...just before the storm. Mm...it reminds me of The Black and me. Alexander's father...gave it to him, before he died."

Significantly, Alec has read up on the story that his father told him on the night of the storm. Recall that, as told by Alec's father, Alexander was just a boy in the crowd—not the king's son—who was "just about your size, just about your age." The boy impetuously announced that he could ride Bucephalus. The king had been resigned to killing him.

But the king didn't die for several years. What Alec says is technically accurate—if we're actually giving somebody something and not bequeathing it, we *have* to be alive—but it's revelatory nonetheless: "Alexander's father...gave it to him, before he died." Alec (his name itself a variation on Alexander) is conflating three significant ideas conveyed at different junctures of our film—One, only *he* can ride The Black; Two, when the Italian fishermen

dubiously eyed the stallion, Alec remarked, "He'll die without me"; Three, The Black was the final gift given by Alec's father (in the symbol of the figurine of Bucephalus, and in the killing of The Black's tyrannical owner, who wanted to kill Alec).

Now the confession: "I was in the water. I couldn't breathe. It was dark, and...mm...I was yelling out for Dad, but...I looked up and there was The Black, and I grabbed on to him."

"He saved your life, didn't he?"

It's not going to work. She can't hang on to him. We recall how he cut short the celebratory dinner she prepared upon his return, taking the entire bowl of fruit salad out to The Black. And when the horse ran away, he didn't beg his mother for help, but instead spent a day-and-a-half, on his own, on-foot, tracking him down. Not only is he *going* to grow up, he already *has*. Eventually we have to stop living out of fear, avoiding pain, fighting—always fighting—to keep death at bay. She knows she cannot dictate his purpose. He found it younger than she wanted, but he's already led an exceptional life, full of tragedy and terror and strength and exultation. It transcends her, and extends beyond her sphere.

He's outgrown her, but they both know it's not his fault.

"Oh, Alec. What am I going to do?"

In a way, it's what her husband wanted. His parting gifts were the knife that saved his life (plus The Black's, when Alec severed the rope), and the figurine that bestowed a kind of preemptory blessing on this decision to put it all on the line.

She knows it's really not her decision.

"I gotta ride."

"Okay, Alec."

The Black Stallion is a glorious film that revels in the quiet, hidden triumphs of the human spirit. It celebrates the gutsy resolution to live the best life we can, no matter what. Alec doesn't trouble himself currying the approval of a fickle world seeking the latest diversion. It wants nothing of lasting worth, so he's not going to waste his time. This extraordinary young man has his horse, and has honored him before the world; we can only hope it's enough, that he can be at peace, that he can feel he's, at last, come home. We leave with many questions—questions for this enigmatic film, questions for ourselves.

This is one of the most beautiful cinematic achievements ever created.