

### Belly flop

The attempts by moviemakers to create big screen resurrections of older popular television shows are mostly like a beach after a storm, strewn with debris and smelly stuff. A few have found the right combination of updating the work with popular actors and modern attitudes but retaining the essence of what made the show popular to begin with, but more often than not, what made such shows popular were their inherent mindlessness, and that never translates well onto the big screen, although there is nothing to say that it won't work better on home video.

The last joke in the 2017 big screen disappointment, **Baywatch**, a Paramount release (UPC#032429277497, \$30), has the star, Dwayne Johnson, and the star of the TV series, David Hasselhoff, looking forward, a bit smugly, to a sequel. Well, the sequel isn't going to happen unless the film is really, really popular on home video, where its baffling R-rating conception will not hinder as many of its potential viewers. The movie takes delight in pushing the TV show's absurd premise—that beach lifeguards do a great deal more than just keeping their eyes on swimmers in the surf and reacting to an occasional emergency; instead, they often have to combat sophisticated criminal activity—to a point of constant ridicule (the beat cop keeps reminding Johnson's character that he's only a lifeguard). That might work if the show were beloved, but despite its popularity, it was hardly anybody's favorite TV series, and no one really cared about how stupid it was. One of the reasons the show was able to attract eyes was its reliable display of bathing beauties, male and female, but while the movie gives some lip service to this attribute—again with a good dose of ridicule—it enthusiastically delves into ribald gags, essentially rubbing your face in it the way an Eighties TV show would never be allowed to. To the film's credit, there is no female nudity, only male nudity, but the film pushes the language (often needlessly) and the innuendo well past what one might expect from a good natured spoof.

As for the plot, it is serviceable. Priyanka Chopra is an evil developotrix, murdering people who are blocking her plans to buy up all of the real estate around the beach. Supported by a generous budget, the film's action scenes are its true saving grace, with chases and leaps and explosions, in and out of the water, that display both energy and inventiveness. Zac Efron co-stars as a disgraced and egotistical Olympic swimmer who eventually learns enough humility to be a part of the team. Alexandra Daddario, Kelly Rohrbach and John Bass are also featured. Running 116 minutes, the stars try hard to make it work, a gag is funny once in a while, and there is just enough action to make the movie, like its Eighties predecessor, watchable, but it is more than likely that interest in the movie will wash out with the next tide, and everyone involved will move on to something else.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playbacks. The image is solid and colors are bright. The 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound has a decent surround mix and is worth amplifying. There is an audio track that describes the action ("They near the smoking yacht, surrounded by a ring of fire. In slow motion, the craft cuts through the water with Mitch crouched in a 'ready' position, holding one side of the throttle. Large chunks of ash float through the air."), alternate French and Spanish audio tracks and optional English, French, Spanish and Portuguese subtitles.

### Wellman silent

From the title and the ad art, it may look like a socially conscious snoozer, but William Wellman's 1928 silent feature, **Beggars of Life**, a Paramount Kino Lorber Incorporated *KL Studio Classics* release (UPC#7383-29217020, \$30), is a lively romantic adventure. Its primary attraction is the stars, including Louise Brooks (whose movies are not readily available with only a handful of exceptions), the top-billed Wallace Beery, who delivers a true movie star performance, and Richard Arlen. Brooks (who is disguised as a boy through much of the film) and Arlen's characters go on the run after she kills her lecherous and abusive foster parent. With the police searching for them, they begin riding the rails, hoping to reach Canada. Beery's character is the alpha male in a group of hobos that the pair encounter. At first, they try to take the girl and dump Arlen's character, but the two defend themselves and eventually Beery's character develops an affection for them and helps them get away from the law. There are a lot of terrific railroad sequences, and the romance that develops between Brooks' psychically damaged character (who has a wonderfully modern presence, as she almost always did) and Arlen's character is nicely expressed. Beery would fall back on his reliable ticks in his later films, but here he is at the top of his game, commanding the screen in every shot he is in, full of life and energy. Running 81 minutes, the film is brisk and engaging, and free of the moral restrictions that would later hogtie Hollywood.

The full screen black-and-white picture is generally in good condition, with minimal damage. The intertitles are fresh, which is a little disconcerting at times, but not distracting. The freshly recorded musical score, taken in part from the original cue sheets, is entirely strings. It works well enough if kept to a modest volume.

There are two commentary tracks, one by William Wellman, Jr. and

one by Brooks historian Thomas Gladysz. They are similar in style (often reading from prepared paragraphs, but reacting a bit to the film as it unfolds) and neither one limits his talk to his area of expertise. Wellman has a lot to say about his father, of course, and shares the stories that were shared to him. "One night, back at the hotel, my father was trying to get some sleep when he was awakened by the hotel manager saying there was a big rumble going on at the pool hall. He said he had already called the local towns and the police were on the way. My father was furious for not coming to him first. Dressed in his pajamas, he took off for the pool hall. It was a shambles. Windows were broken, pool balls were flying every which way and my father, using two trashcan tops as shields, entered the pool hall. He began shouting for the battle to stop. He yelled that the cops were on the way, and he told his men to get out and back to the hotel. He told them to lock their doors and get in bed. Some were hurt and bleeding, but all scurried out leaving the pool hall looking like a war zone. My father and the company doctor took care of the wounded, after my dad told the hotel manager if he said a word to the cops he would be joining the wounded. Back at the war zone, the police found no one to arrest, and they soon departed. Some extra funds were added to the film's budget and the company grips, carpenters, painters and prop men rejuvenated the pool hall over the weekend. And at this point, Dad hired the locals who were in the battle to play hobos in the film." He recalls being scared of Beery later on, when Beery was appearing in another Wellman movie and he got to sit on the actor's lap. He also talks about the other cast and crew members, about the film's dramatic content ("I like the way my father keeps the action moving. There's really not much going on, except [the actors] are always moving forward, they're always going somewhere. Kind of the propulsion to the way he shoots. Even when there's not a lot of pace, there's pace. It's not zipping along, because there are things we need to see. He keeps it moving, you see their legs, you see them walking. There's always forward motion going on."), and about the production's history (although currently lost, there was an original audio track for the film that had Beery singing a song and repeating some incidental dialog).

Whatever details Wellman leaves out, Gladysz covers, not just in Brooks' biography, but with everything else related to the film, and he also provides insights on the film's artistry and how it was received at the time (audiences were not as familiar with the depiction of sexual abuse as they are today, and found parts of the movie to be far fetched). Other than a few basic stories, there is not that much overlap between the two talks, and a great deal to learn from both of them.

### Hollywood laundry

Robert Aldrich's 1955 adaptation of a Clifford Odets play about Hollywood, **The Big Knife**, has been released on a DVD & Blu-ray by Arrow Video (UPC#760137035787, \$40). Jack Palance is a popular movie star being pressured by his studio to sign a long-term contract and Ida Lupino is his loving but alienated wife. Rod Steiger, with a blond crewcut, is the studio chief blackmailing him into signing, and Shelley Winters is a goodtime girl who knows a secret about Palance's character that nobody wants the public to find out. Jean Hagen, Wendell Corey and Everett Sloane are also featured. All of the performances are wonderful and superb, with Lupino's delivery being the cream of the cream. The stageplay structure of the narrative is fairly obvious, as there are a limited number of sets and long scenes where characters exit and enter to advance the plot (although the play took place in one night while the film is spread out over several days). Running 112 minutes, the film's limitations gradually reveal themselves, and the ending is telescoped as well, but the movie has a basic, gossipy appeal, and the humanizing performances are so effective that the film remains reasonably appealing, despite its emotional downswings.

The black-and-white picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The image has some inherent grain, but contrasts are finely detailed and the presentation is just rough enough to underscore the film's atmosphere perfectly. The monophonic sound is strong and crisp, and there are optional English subtitles. Along with a trailer, there is a terrific 5-minute on-the-set promo that originally appeared on TV, and a wonderful 1977 34-minute profile of title designer Saul Bass, which includes complete clips of a number of his greatest title sequences. Sure, the clips are squeezed and are not in the greatest condition, but just hearing the music and watching the memorable title sequences from **Man with a Golden Arm**, **Walk on the Wild Side**, **West Side Story**, **It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World**, **The Big Country**, **Grand Prix** and several others, one after another, is a real kick.

Finally, film critics Glenn Kenny and Nick Pendleton provide a good commentary track, talking a lot about Aldrich, Odets, the cast, Hollywood, and the times when the film was made, as well as the history of the play itself and the different actors who had appeared in it onstage. Palance's character had a big hit in a boxing film, and they talk about the other boxing movies of the day and what the significance of this reference is for the film at hand, "Equating the actor and athlete, and emphasizing the degree to which these bodies are treated as properties by the managerial forces who are ostensibly looking out for them." The talk is consistently insightful and informative.