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The compleat Tom Jones

Tony Richardson's still delightful 1963 Oscar-winning romantic comedy, **Tom Jones**, has been released in a two-platter Blu-ray set by The Criterion Collection (UPC#715515209915, \$40). Anticipating the liberated comedic style of Richard Lester, Richardson's film is a brilliant adaptation of the Eighteenth Century Henry Fielding novel, ferreting out the inherent humor, romance and humanity at the heart of the work while adapting it to a modern cinematic grammar that streamlines its prose without dulling it poesy. Indeed, the film's wonderful pre-credit sequence is presented as a silent film, with intertitles and an especially jolly passage from John Addison's bubbly musical score, to show how the hero first came into the world, while later it makes state-of-the-art use of aerial helicopter shots and handheld cameras. The film's manner follows the moods of the narrative, ranging from the sped-up New Wave-ish presentation of some of its farcical moments to a lyrical and evocative deliberateness during its true romantic sequences, and the somber turn that occurs as the story approaches its climax. Throughout the film, however, there is also a unique and irresistible epigrammatic narration, read to perfection by Micheál MacLiammóir, that conjoins with the period setting and costumes to anchor the film and its mores in the past.

Albert Finney is the titular character, the adopted son of a landowner who is in love with the girl next door, played by Susannah York, but still sowing his wild oats, as well, when the landowner's legitimate nephew (David Warner, who has a rather large part but is last in the long cast list of primary players, albeit because his name is at the bottom of the alphabet) deviously works to have him banished from the estate. In the film's second half, he travels to London and has a number of saucy adventures along the way, all of which, with the marvelous and elegant coincidences of classic narrative fiction, have a bearing on both his past and his future. The film's two other stars, Hugh Griffith and Edith Evans, play the father and aunt of York's character and represent, within the film, a sort of marked generational contrast to Finney and York. The film was probably 2 to 3 years ahead of its time in this regard, but was remarkably forgotten, to a large extent, when the Sixties youthwave hit, perhaps because its Oscar win had made it too establishmentarian. In any case, Griffith and Evans are both brilliant, not just delivering the full spirited comedy of their parts without hesitation, but finding in themselves additional magnificences of the smallest comical quirks. They are both good hearted, but crazy enough that they amplify the clarity and purity of the relationship between Finney and York's characters. The film is an enduring gem, a masterpiece in its blending of eras, styles and sensibilities, and it will continue to bring love and laughter to viewers for as long as the movies endure.

The first platter contains the film's original theatrical release, which runs a brisk 128 minutes. In 1989, Richardson created a lamentable 121-minute *Director's Cut* (by removing bits and pieces not directly relevant to the main narrative), which appears on the second platter. Somebody should have slapped his hand. The balance of styles and ideas in the original movie is so intricate and so perfect that any change throws the movie out of whack, and that is what you feel as you watch the alternate version. The movie's highlights are still there, but it just doesn't work right. Richardson thought he was streamlining the film for jaded audiences, but instead of upgrading the movie with nips and tucks, he accidentally removed a bit of its soul.

Both presentations are letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.66:1. In part as a stance against the refined stodginess of other costume films and in part an inevitable byproduct of the film's budget, the cinematography has always been a somewhat grainy, with night scenes compromised the most. The new image transfer, however, is terrific, with much of the film appearing solid and bright, while the most challenged segments are stable and, at most, evocatively textured. The monophonic sound on the theatrical version is crisp and solid. The *Director's Cut* was remastered in a mild stereo that brings a dimensionality to the music and

environmental effects, and a few directional noises. The embellishments are not necessary, but unlike the editing, they are a welcome tweak to the movie's pleasures. Both versions have optional English subtitling.

Each platter also has a few special features. The best is a 22-minute segment on the *Director's Cut* platter that provides a satisfying history of the film's financing and production (Finney got a decent percentage of the profits and really never had to work again unless he felt like it, since the film was so enormously successful in relation to its cost), mixed with a deft analysis of its impact on the British film industry. There is also a 10-minute interview with Robert Lambert, who helped edit the *Director's Cut* and tries to explain where Richardson was coming from when he agreed to do it; and a good 25-minute combination of older and newer interviews with the late cinematographer, Walter Lassally, with reflections by film critic Peter Cowie, that goes over how the film's various visual approaches were executed. The theatrical cut platter has a nice 5-minute interview with Finney from a 1982 broadcast of *The Dick Cavett Show*; a wonderful 10-minute reminiscence by Vanessa Redgrave, who wasn't in the movie (although her sister, Lynn, was) but was married to Richardson and fondly recalls hanging out with the cast and crew for most of the shoot; and an excellent 8-minute audio interview with Addison (accompanied by clips from the film and still photos), who, like so many composers, understood the essence of the film, and also talks about his approach to his craft.

Gorgeous Apartment

The widescreen black-and-white cinematography in Billy Wilder's 1960 United Artists Oscar winner, **The Apartment**, looks fantastic on the 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment Arrow Academy Blu-ray release (UPC#760137081883, \$50). Not only is the image crisp down to the smallest detail, but the contrasts spread across the image are delicately graduated, so that one half of the screen can be very dark, the other half very light and you can still see all of the detail clearly on both sides. The presentation is so sharp that there are moments when the cinematography itself goes out of focus on one part of the screen. Normally, you'd barely be aware of it, but the BD picks up everything so precisely that if the depth of field is not rendered exactly, it's noticeable, even fleetingly. We did see one or two tiny, thread like scratches, but essentially, the presentation is spotless and immaculate.

Which helps the film considerably. One of Wilder's dark romantic comedies, Jack Lemmon is an unmarried office worker who allows executives to use his nearby apartment for trysting, in exchange for the promise of one day receiving a promotion. When the head of personnel, played deliciously by Fred MacMurray, learns about the scheme, everything works out as planned, until Lemmon's character falls for the lover of MacMurray's character, an elevator operator played by Shirley MacLaine. Lemmon's performance is a bit of a cliché—he spends the night outdoors, and comes to work the next day sneezing a lot—but the vivid widescreen cinematography, which has an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1, modulates his excesses, and all the more so when the image is so effectively textured. Seen as it was intended, the 125-minute feature is both wickedly satirical and redemptively romantic. Its comedic rhythms are precise and unflinching (especially when the image and the monophonic sound are so exact), and, unlike some of Wilder's other creations, its topicality has been unaffected by changing values and standards. Wilder used to ridicule communist film critics who praised the assessment of capitalism in **The Apartment**, where the upper classes exploit the lower classes, but were then thrown for a loop when Wilder turned around and made **One, Two, Three** (Jan 18), spoofing the eagerness with which the more privileged members of the communist hierarchy wanted exactly the same thing. In reality, Wilder was right both times, and that is why both movies endure in their comedy and their underlying social truthfulness. Meanwhile, it is the stars and the gorgeous presentations that make the films so irresistibly entertaining.

Apartment (Continued)

An alternate 5.1-channel DTS audio track is included that brings a terrific dimensionality to the musical score and enhances pretty much every sound the film has. Unless you are a purist, it is worth selecting. There are optional English subtitles, a trailer, and a 2-minute silent segment detailing the improvements that were made with the transfer over previous releases. There is a good 29-minute retrospective documentary, a nice 13-minute profile of Lemmon, 39 minutes of worthwhile analysis of the film's artistry, a terrific 23-minute interview with Wilder in which he talks about such things as story structure and character development using **The Apartment** for examples, and a lovely 14-minute retrospective interview with Hope Holiday from 2017, who becomes very emotional when recalling the praise she received for her brief part in the film.

Additionally, there is a commentary with film historian Bruce Block, who provides more backgrounds for Wilder, Lemmon, MacLaine, MacMurray and the other cast and crew members, points out the artistic dynamics in a number of the shots, and discusses the arc of the narrative. He has access to the shooting script and identifies both how detailed Wilder's original vision of the film was (down to specific mannerisms by the actors and items in the set designs) and the few instances where the finished film diverged from what was planned (you can confirm this yourself, since Arrow has included the original shooting script as a PDF file on the Blu-ray). He also admires Wilder's eye. "Even with the small apartment, the way it's been designed, staged and photographed, it has tremendous depth. You see all the way back into both rooms. You never feel claustrophobic in here, but at the same time, it has a completely opposite feel from the office itself. The office is a giant, impersonal place. It's all straight lines. Here in the apartment there's all kinds of curves. The apartment is very dark. One of their plans was to have no white objects in the apartment. Everything would be darker. It was supposed to be a snug haven away from the office. So, on purpose, there are two completely different visual worlds."

The best of the best

Even by the pinnacle standards of Japanese widescreen cinematography, and even by the equally high standards of the Criterion Collection image transfers, the Criterion Blu-ray release of Kon Ichikawa's 1963 **An Actor's Revenge** (UPC#715515210713, \$40) is utterly and constantly, breathtakingly beautiful. And the story is terrific, too. Set in the Nineteenth Century, a stage star, played by Kazuo Hasegawa, who specializes in female roles and, while his is supremely adept at swordplay and physical combat, affects a feminine manner while off the stage as well, plots an elaborate vengeance against the men who were responsible for the deaths of his parents. Running 113 minutes, there are exciting fight scenes, moments of choice humor and many engaging dramatic sequences involving a variety of characters (the riff-raff of Edo begin to get wind of what the hero is up to and shadow his progress, hoping to take advantage of the ensuing chaos; Hasegawa has a second part as one such character, a watchful thief, and other big stars have cameo parts, such as Raizo Ichikawa and Shintaro Katsu).

In other words, it would be a terrifically entertaining movie even if it was just another normal Japanese revenge movie. But the stagecraft during every moment of the film is outstanding. The screen is often a solid black—without a hint of distortion thanks to Criterion's transfer—with just one or two portions of it illuminated. Those portions are so spectacularly colorful, however, that they easily counterbalance the blackness. And when the entire screen is illuminated, the silks of the costumes, the flowers in the décor and other peripheral hues are so vivid and distinctive that you want to freeze every frame and savor every design. Even when the colors are subdued by night or winter, the shades and tones are rich and finely detailed, as are the precisely accurate flesh tones at all times.

The film's presentation is unique, even in the body of Ichikawa's work, for the manner in which it advances the narrative, sort of straddling a dream world between the stage and reality (everything was shot on soundstages). Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.39:1, sometimes the production designs are incredibly spare, while other times they are highly detailed and cluttered, but there is not a moment in the film that is not wholly transfixed. It is not just the story that is exciting, it is the manner of the story's presentation that is thrilling, bringing forth a revelation that, despite the adage about nothing in the movies being original, there is so much more potential to what the cinema can be or become than filmmakers have ever even tried to achieve.

Naturally, in addition to the picture, the monophonic sound is also transferred without a blemish. The musical score is a devious mix of classic Japanese stage instrumentals, exquisite orchestral underscoring andiffies cocktail jazz schmaltz, the latter woven through the movie just enough to instill a compelling nostalgia without overstaying its welcome. The sword clashes are also crisp. The film is in Japanese with optional English subtitles, and comes with a kind of fish-in-the-barrel 13-minute deconstruction that goes over its principal artistic triumphs and how Ichikawa's sensibilities guided its creation. The segment is great, but it could obviously run for another couple of hours and still not cover everything. Additionally, there is a terrific 58-minute interview with Ichikawa from 1999. He never mentions **Actor's Revenge**, but he does go over his full biography, explaining how he got into the movie business, how working at the different studios enabled him to expand his interests and techniques, and what inspired him to take on the variety of projects that have extended the range of his remarkable career.

The conclusion to the latest Planet of the Apes

Too serious for its own good, there is less joy in **War for the Planet of the Apes**, released by 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment as a *Blu-ray 3D / Blu-ray / Digital* title (UPC#024543432227, \$40), than there was in the two previous installments. Rarely driven by the wit and energy that guided its predecessors, the 2017 film begins as a sort of **Outlaw Josey Wales** and ends up mixing **Apocalypse Now** with the biblical *Exodus*, but it is mostly a dark and foreboding adventure with a fairly arbitrary spectacle at its climax. Just like the final film in the original **Apes** series, **Battle for the Planet of the Apes** (Sep 00), the movie ends up existing because it has to, not because it wants to.

Fortunately, however, the quality of the preceding films was so high that the feature can go down a couple of notches and still deliver some decent entertainment. The action scenes are very well staged, and offer fresh perspectives of the apes doing battle with humans. The ape hero, again embodied with great emotional dexterity by Andy Serkis, chooses to lead his band out of the sanctuary of the forest after humans kill most of his family. He parts with his group to seek revenge, although three of his closest companions accompany him, and they eventually find an enormous human outpost that a crazed colonel, played by Woody Harrelson, is treating as his own private kingdom, using captured apes as slaves while he attempts to construct an impenetrable fortress. The heroes eventually get captured, and so on. Running 140 minutes, the special effects are impeccable, individual sequences have occasional wit, and there are not only some invigorating action scenes, but an elaborate escape sequence that is highly satisfying.

The film is also improved by its presentation in 3D, since both the forests and the cages bring a compelling sense of placement to the characters. The film works perfectly fine without the effects, and they bring nothing thematic to the movie (neither the special features nor director Matt Reeves' commentary track make any mention whatsoever of the format), but they do add to the movie's atmosphere and increase the stimulation of the imagery.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. Although much of the movie is dark, details are nicely articulated regardless of the availability of light, and the colors are precise. The 7.1-channel DTS sound has a strong bass and some good dimensional effects. Michael Giacchino's musical score has some inventive moments—he messes with the Fox fanfare in the opening—but its primary theme is too irritatingly similar to *It Ain't Necessarily So*, which we could not stop singing to ourselves after the film had ended. There is an audio track that describes the action ("Caesar and his posse near the thief, who rides down a sloping path. The pursuing apes travel along the ridge above, a row of trees between them. As the ground levels out, their paths converge and the figure aims the shotgun back at Caesar. The shot hits a tree branch, spraying Caesar with powdery snow. The fleeing thief continues to shoot back at Caesar and his apes as they ride under a ski lift terminal and pass dilapidated gondolas. The white horse gallops up the steep slope, passing by a plow trapped in the snow. Caesar and his apes go by the plow, following the ski lift cables past another terminal. They slow upon seeing the white horse without its rider, outside a derelict hotel."), alternate French and Spanish audio tracks, and optional English, French and Spanish subtitles. The 3D platter has those same language options, additional Portuguese audio and subtitling, and no other special features.

On the BD, there are 23 minutes of good deleted scenes that would have made the story easier to piece together, but not at the cost of expanding the running time even more than it was expanded. The sequences also provide ample opportunity to see the real actors (with dots on their faces). A comprehensive collection of developmental artwork is presented in still frame. A collection of production featurettes running 59 minutes provides a reasonably thorough look at how the film was conceived and staged, while an additional 28 minutes of promotional featurettes may be flagrantly promoting all of the **Ape** movies and TV shows in Fox's library, but still takes genuine delight in showing how the recent films, and especially **War**, have drawn references and allusions to the other movies and, in a way, fit into their circle.

Reeves speaks over both the film and the deleted scenes, supported by optional subtitling. It is telling that the first half of his talk is excellent, as he describes the intricate process of filming human actors and then turning them into apes, and the allowances he had to make when setting up his blocking ("This was the hardest scene for me to shoot in the whole movie because it was purely virtual. In the last scene, where the camera's moving, I can choreograph those shots because they're really about the movement of actors in space that's meant to reveal a space and to give you the emotion.

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