



# QUEUED UP BY BRYAN REESMAN

## SLEIGHT (2017)

**The set-up:** Resorting to drug peddling to help raise his younger sister following their parents' deaths, a young magician named Bo (Jacob Latimore) starts getting in too deep with an increasingly violent dealer (Dulé Hill). Fearing for his life and that of his sister (Storm Reid) and new girlfriend (Sychele Gabriel), Bo must find a way out of his predicament by exploiting his "magic," which is more than just sleight of hand.

**The breakdown:** While it has been labeled a superhero film

by some, *Sleight* skirts that genre's norms in portraying a conflicted young man trying to rise above his oppressive circumstances before they destroy him. Bo wants to be a hero to his oblivious sister even though his methods are not heroic, but his character experiences an awakening once confronted with horrible reality. JD Dillard's directorial debut benefits from strong lead performances and a realistic tone despite the technological "magic" that takes the story into superhero territory. Some unanswered questions and the



mysterious ending allude to another installment, which has frustrated some viewers, but given the film's \$4 million return on a \$250,000 budget, it's likely we'll get more to this interesting saga.

## THE BIRD WITH THE CRYSTAL PLUMAGE (1970)

**The set-up:** American writer Sam Dalmas (Tony Musante) visiting Italy finds his stay extended by the police after he witnesses the attempted murder of a beautiful woman (Eva Renzi) by a masked killer in an art gallery. Trying to recall key clues, Sam ends up conducting his own investigation. But as he gets closer to the truth, he and his girlfriend (Suzy Kendall) find themselves the target of more than one killer, which deepens the mystery.

**The breakdown:** The first *giallo* from legendary Italian director Dario Argento (*Suspiria*), this stylish suspense shocker has



held up well over the last 47 years. The mixture of edgy violence with Vittorio Storaro's elegant cinematography and Ennio Morricone's beguiling score delivers a gritty murder mystery with a surprise ending. Arrow Video has pulled out all the stops on this reissue with

a nice 4K transfer, numerous bonus features including a new Argento interview, a nice double sided foldout poster, six lobby card reproductions, and a 60-page book with essays and photos. List priced at \$50 (but cheaper online), this set is worth every penny.

## STORMY MONDAY (1988)

**The set-up:** In a classic case of star-crossed paths, a newly hired jazz club janitor named Brendan (a young, pre-*GoT* Sean Bean) becomes amorously entangled with a waitress (Melanie Griffith). It turns she also works as an escort for a corrupt American businessman (Tommy Lee Jones) using her to smooth over the political process of buying up a huge swatch of property in Newcastle, England that includes the club. But Brendan's boss Finney (Sting) does not want to sell, setting up violent confrontations and a potentially

dire end to the two lovers who get caught in the crossfire.

**The breakdown:** Written and directed by Mike Figgis (*Leaving Las Vegas*), *Stormy Monday* is an '80s noir that favors character over the parade of violence that one might see in like-minded films. There is still some brutishness to be found, but overall it's a more thoughtful story. Roger Deakins' atmospheric cinematography imbues the film with a dreamy quality at times, along with the director's own bluesy and jazzy score. At times understated,



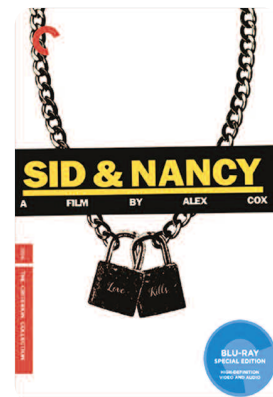
Figgis' directorial debut is an engaging romantic thriller. Figgis and critic Damon Wise offer a commentary track on the making of the film, while critic Neil Young revisits the filming locations.

## SID & NANCY (1986)

**The set-up:** Before he joins The Sex Pistols as their bassist, Sid Vicious (Gary Oldman) falls into a heroin-laced relationship with Nancy Spungen (Chloe Webb). During his tenure in the short-lived and iconic punk band, and beyond as he slips into a drug-induced haze, their co-dependent and destructive behavior alienates them from their friends and family and heads them down a fatalistic path.

**The breakdown:** Beautifully shot by Roger Deakins, director/co-writer Alex Cox's gritty portrayal of the toxic twins

of punk walks that fine line between empathy and an honest examination of two pathetic people unable to escape their demons. The film capably captures the chaotic energy of the original punk movement as well as the abrasive interaction between its protagonists (defiantly played by Oldman and Webb), although their constant downward spiral can be exhausting to watch. One wishes there were more of their backstory presented, and Criterion's bonus features, including a vintage interview with smacked out Sid and Nancy, a controversial Sex

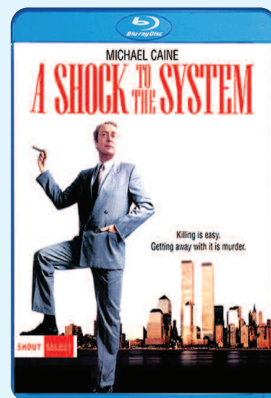


Pistols talk show appearance from 1976, and clips from a new documentary on the couple, help to fill in the cracks. Cox also weighs in with both fond recollections and candid regrets about the film.

## A SHOCK TO THE SYSTEM (1990)

**The set-up:** After losing a promotion to a younger, more ruthless executive (Peter Riegert), and being derided by his social climbing wife (Swoosie Kurtz), Graham Marshall (Michael Caine) is at his wit's end. Then he accidentally kills a homeless man in the subway following a tense confrontation...and gets away with it. Soon Graham begins to contemplate what would happen if he bumped off the people making his life miserable, then sets out on his drastic course of action, which also includes seducing his attractive co-worker Stella Anderson (Elizabeth McGovern).

**The breakdown:** One of my favorite films, this underappreciated effort from director Jan Egleston, adapted by screenwriter Andrew Klavan from Simon Brett's novel, may seem less shocking today in terms of its charming and homicidal anti-hero. But at the time the approach of empathizing with such a morally bankrupt character was uncommon. Enhanced by Gary Chang's jazzy score, *A Shock To The System* has always been deserving of a wider audience for its dark comedy driven by Graham's devious machinations which are so well executed by Caine. A new nine-minute interview with Egleston delves

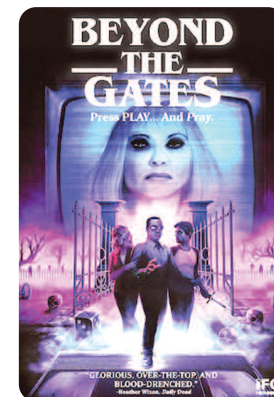


into how he reworked the book's less edgy ending to better suit the film, and all without shooting new footage. It is illuminating, but I wish there were more bonus materials after all these years.

## BEYOND THE GATES (2016)

Remember VCR board games from the '80s? Neither do I, but they evidently existed when I was growing up. That concept serves as the focal point in this modern throwback in which two estranged brothers — recovering alcoholic Gordon (Graham Skipper) and dubiously employed John (Chase Williamson) — reunite to close up their late father's video store. When they discover the creepy old VCR game "Beyond The Gates" in their pop's office, the two brothers and Gordon's girlfriend Margot (Brea Grant)

decide to play the board/TV game. They soon realize that the ghoulish host (Barbara Crampton) is interacting with them live through the TV and that their father died playing the game. The siblings have a chance to save his soul from damnation, but it involves risking Margot and fending off the undead. While Jackson Stewart's film suffers from a languid pace and some underdeveloped characters, the brothers' chemistry, a few fun shocks and humorous touches, and a great synthwave score from



Wojciech Golczewski keep it entertaining for those seeking an '80s flashback without revisiting old favorites. More could have been done here, but it's still pretty good fun.

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