

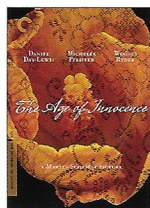
proach, melding theatrical performances and expressionistic images with a script that leaps forward with rapid-fire exposition and break-neck momentum. It can be hard to follow the intricacies of the plot but Ichikawa puts the characters in the foreground and he films entirely in the studio to create distinctive images that sometimes seem to be playing out on a stylized kabuki stage and at other times in a heightened cinematic space, all set to an eclectic modern score. *An Actor's Revenge* is gorgeous, compelling, and constantly surprising. Ichikawa never made another film like it. Extras include a 1999 interview with the director and a new interview with film historian Tony Rayns. Highly recommended. (S. Axmaker)

The Age of Innocence

★★★★1/2

Criterion, 138 min., PG, DVD: 2 discs, \$29.95; Blu-ray: \$39.95

The Age of Innocence is not the only costume drama or period piece made by Martin Scorsese, but it is his only classic literature adaptation and it shows a different side of this filmmaker who is known for edgy violence and cinematic energy. Adapted from Edith Wharton's 1920 novel and set in 19th-century New York City, this 1993 film stars Daniel Day-Lewis as Newland Archer, a respected lawyer and respectable member of elite society who is engaged to the beautiful young May (Winona Ryder) but falls in love with her cousin, the worldly Countess Ellen Olenska (Michelle Pfeiffer). Some have suggested that the film's presentation of the ruthless rules of conduct of high society serves as a companion to the more volatile and physical codes of Scorsese's gangster movies. That may be true, but here the director adopts a subtle, nuanced style to the dialogue, where conversation is akin to verbal dueling over what characters mean but never actually say. Along the way, Scorsese pays tribute to filmmakers Max Ophüls and Luchino Visconti, and to William Wyler's *The Heiress* and Orson Welles's *The Magnificent Ambersons*. Arguably Scorsese's most overlooked masterpiece, one hopes that the Criterion stamp of approval will help audiences discover it anew. Extras include new interviews with Scorsese, screenwriter Jay Cocks, production designer Dante Ferreri, and costume designer Gabriella Pescucci, as well as an archival behind-the-scenes featurette, and a booklet. Highly recommended. (S. Axmaker)

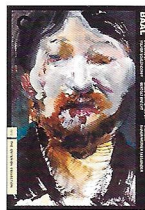


Baal

Criterion, 84 min., in German w/English subtitles, not rated, DVD: \$29.95, Blu-ray: \$39.95

Rainer Werner Fassbinder had yet to make his name as a filmmaker when he was cast in the leading role of Volker Schlöndorff's 1970 adaptation of Bertold Brecht's 1918

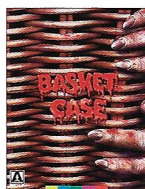
first play. Fassbinder is the vulgar, sadistic Baal, a hedonistic working-class poet who insults his patrons with anti-authoritarian glee and is (almost absurdly) irresistible to women, who endure his humiliations until he heartlessly dumps them. Baal's romantic poetry suggests a sensitive soul but he behaves like a monstrous man-child with voracious appetites and a sadistic streak, destroying the lives of everyone he touches, including a fellow poet (Sigi Graue) who can't seem to break away from the mysteriously charismatic Baal. Schlöndorff was one of the founders of the New German Cinema and this film, made for German TV on a tiny budget, is his most experimental. The actors were cast from Munich's experimental theater world, including many members of Fassbinder's Antitheater troupe (Hanna Schygulla, Günther Kaufmann, and Irm Hermann). *Baal* is an unpleasant film by design—shot with a jittery handheld camera on 16mm—but it is an interesting time capsule that captures Fassbinder as a young actor, along with the rebellious impulses of the new generation of German filmmakers. Unavailable for decades and only recently revived and restored, *Baal* bows on home video in a Criterion special edition with extras including new and archival interviews with filmmaker Schlöndorff, costar Margarethe von Trotta, and film historian Eric Rentschler, as well as a conversation between Ethan Hawke and playwright Jonathan Marc Sherman, and a booklet. Recommended. (S. Axmaker)



Basket Case

Arrow, 91 min., not rated, Blu-ray: \$39.99

The 1982 debut feature of filmmaker Frank Henenlotter is a gruesome cult indie-horror drama of brotherly love and righteous vengeance shot on location in the seedier sections of New York City. Kevin Van Hentenryck stars in this low-budget exercise in grotesquery and gore as Duane, the "normal" brother sent by his deformed, formerly-conjoined twin Belial to take revenge on the doctors who separated the two and left the blobby, grotesquely misshapen sibling to die. Henenlotter was reared on the cheap horror films of Herschell Gordon Lewis and other independent exploitation directors of the 1960s and '70s, and *Basket Case* is in many ways his tribute to the grindhouse horror films that he loves, a cheapie monster movie with creative twists and DIY special effects that are created with a mix of puppets, models, and stop-motion animation. Most of the effects shrewdly take place just offscreen, with spurts of blood and a gnarly hand dragging the character out of view to feed our imaginations. Henenlotter

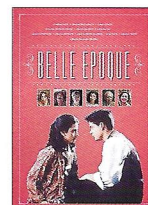


adopts a loving B-movie attitude and brings a genuine sense of tragedy to the character of the snaggle-toothed Belial in this cult classic that offers an inspired twist on the Cain and Abel story. Newly remastered for its Blu-ray debut, this special edition features a wealth of extras, including new and archival audio commentaries with Henenlotter, cast and crew interviews, behind-the-scenes featurettes, bonus short films, image galleries, and a booklet. Recommended. (S. Axmaker)

Belle Epoque

Olive, 109 min., in Spanish w/English subtitles, R, DVD: \$24.99, Blu-ray: \$29.99

Winner of the 1994 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, the Spanish comedy *Belle Epoque* is a sexy, romantic romp about an army deserter in 1931 Spain who takes refuge with an aging artist and his four beautiful daughters in a remote country villa. As the monarchy falls and the Spanish Civil War erupts, this farm becomes a refuge, an idyllic escape from the violence, offering brief peace for the handsome young soldier (Jorge Sanz), who is as enchanted by the daughters as they are with him. It's hard to tell just who is seducing who as he ends up sleeping with each woman in turn: the widow (Miriam Diaz-Aroca), the flirt (Maribel Verdu), the tomboy (Ariadna Gil, who seduces him only after he puts on a dress for a costume party), and the youngest sister (Penelope Cruz), an innocent virgin who desperately wants to indulge in the pleasures that her sisters have already experienced. Much sweeter than this description makes it sound, director Fernando Trueba's *Belle Epoque* has the sun-dappled beauty of an Impressionist painting, and the mix of comic innocence and romantic delight in this temporary Eden is poignantly set against the coming horrors. Highly recommended. (S. Axmaker)



The Covered Wagon

★★★★

Kino Lorber, 98 min., not rated, DVD: \$19.99, Blu-ray: \$29.99

The first Western epic, made in 1923, follows a wagon train from Westport Landing (soon to become Kansas City) to Oregon. J. Warren Kerrigan is our hero, playing the handsome and experienced Will Banion, who joins the massive Wingate wagon train and falls for the expedition leader's daughter, Molly (Lois Wilson). Naturally, there's a romantic triangle—she's engaged to Sam Woodhull (Alan Hale), who immediately smears Will's reputation and has him ejected from the wagon train—that plays out over the episodic odyssey across the unsettled West, circa 1848. The wagon train endures a dangerous river crossing, an Indian attack, near-starvation, a buffalo hunt,

