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Rocco restored

Traditionally looking more ragged than its characters at the beginning of the film, Luchino Visconti's **Rocco and His Brothers** has undergone a full-fledged, uncensored restoration and has been released on an excellent two-platter Blu-ray by Milestone Film & Video (UPC#78414801-5354, \$40). The presentation of the 1960 feature not only looks pristine, but every missing piece of it has been restored. The narrative does jump ahead in time periodically, but the leaps are no longer confusing, and there are no longer references to events that in past releases (Jul 04) had not occurred. Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1, the black-and-white image is smooth and sharp, with meticulously defined contrasts. And there is not a scratch or a blemish to be seen. The monophonic sound has also been stabilized, and no longer comes across as scratchy or wobbly. Nino Rota's musical score is haunting and sounds better here than it has on many past soundtrack albums (the score was also restored a couple of years ago on a lovely CD, but that is outside of our purview).

Running 179 minutes, the film is specifically about the love/hate relationship between two of the brothers, one a failed boxer played by Renato Salvatori and the other a successful boxer, played by Alain Delon. Underscoring Italy's post-War industrial growth, the film begins with the family moving from Southern Italy to Milan after the father has died, as the characters cope with being relative strangers in their society, something that pointedly, despite everything else that happens, is no longer an issue by the end of the film. The movie has title cards demarcating the different segments of the story with the names of each of the five brothers, but while there is some vaguely additional attentions brought to each brother in his segment, the focus of the story remains upon the Salvatori and Delon characters. The emotions feel, at times, like they've come straight from *Cavalleria Rusticana*, even though they've been plopped into the modern world, but the film is incredibly rich and humanist in its drama, observing the often conflicting interests of a dozen different characters, and the direction is outstanding, whether Visconti is overseeing enormous crowd scenes or intimate exchanges. It was always clear that the film was some sort of masterpiece, but now that the presentation has been elevated to match the quality of Visconti's artistry, that supposition is resoundingly affirmed.

Claudia Cardinale, Annie Girardot, Katina Paxinou, Spiros Focas and Max Cartier are also featured. The film is accompanied by a 3-minute introduction from Martin Scorsese and is in Italian with optional English subtitles. The chapter markers have only been applied to the five title cards.

The second platter contains 6 minutes of interesting outtakes that capture Visconti shouting directions to his actors and noting the instances where crude optical effects were used to alter the name of Delon's character on boxing posters and headlines (the producers panicked after someone took issue with the original name). There is a 3-minute 'before and after' comparison that is surprising not for how nice the film was made to look, but for how terribly battered it was before. A terrific 34-minute collection of archival retrospective interviews includes Cardinale, Girardot, and other members of the cast and crew. As the production designer, Mario Garbuglia, points out, despite the film's Neo-Realist airs, all of the interiors, and a few of the exteriors, were shot on soundstages. Finally, there is a superb 41-minute interview with the daughter of screenwriter Suso Cecchi D'Amico, Caterina D'Amico, who has written a biography of Visconti and provides a detailed breakdown of how the film's story was developed, and what happened after the movie was completed. "It is difficult today, 50 something years later, to understand how new, in a way, **Rocco and His Brothers** was. It is difficult to realize, first of all, how violent this film was, how disturbing it was, which explains why it was so heavily censored. It was a huge scandal. It was considered embarrassing, evil, terrible."

Monsters and robots

A superficial but decently staged movie about giant robots fighting giant monsters, **Pacific Rim Uprising**, has been released as a 4K Ultra HD title by Universal (UPC#191329028889, \$38). Evocative of the **Transformer** films, the movie is also a specific tribute to the original Japanese monster movies, with the climactic battle staged in Tokyo and on the slopes of Mt. Fuji. The first **Pacific Rim** film (Nov 13) was conceived and directed by Guillermo del Toro, and blended its Saturday matinee sensibilities with an intense psychological exploration of its characters, who had to 'merge' their minds in order to operate the enormous robots. Written and directed by Steven S. DeKnight, Del Toro had little to do with the sequel (he was one of the producers), but it is the remnants of his original concepts that give the film an air of respectability (Del Toro did suggest what turned out to be the film's strongest and most pleasing dramatic scene, in which the villain is revealed). Building on those concepts, the characters are engaging and are performed with an earnest spirit. John Boyega stars as a typically reluctant but gutsy hero, with newcomer Cailee Spaeny as a prodigious robot operator and Scott Eastwood, looking ever more like Clint, as Boyega's skeptical partner. Charlie Day and Burn Gorman return from the earlier feature.

The film runs 111 minutes, and plot points zoom by so quickly the viewer, quite deliberately, has no time to question the logic, even the film's logic (such as how Spaeny's character built her own big robot), of how things are playing out, but the beats are steady and the visions are grand, which is where the 4K delivery comes into play. From the opening company logos, including the Universal globe, which have been altered in construction to match the film's finely detailed, high-tech schematics, the movie's production design is comprehensively executed and ideally suited for 4K delivery. You may not see desks and potted plants come flying out of the buildings as the monsters crash through them, but you do see pretty much every speck of dust and chunk of concrete. There is no going back to the standard Blu-ray, which is also included in the two-platter set, after you experience the film in 4K. The production design is so thorough and intricate that your subconscious is absorbing minutia even if your conscience is being distracted by the action. The special effects are seamless. At some point, you sort of realize you are watching a partially animated film, since the filmmakers could not possibly be staging everything for real, but where the one ends and the other begins is never discernible. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1.

The Dolby Atmos sound is also grandly satisfying on the 4K disc, placing you in the center of the action with noises coming from everywhere, and not even the Atmos track on the BD delivers those noises with quite the same articulation or force. The standard BD has an audio track that describes the action ("The rogue Jaeger fires energy from its chest, blasting Gypsy Avenger. Jake and Nate summon a large glowing sword from one of Gypsy's arms. The rogue Jaeger pulls out two fiery blades."). Both platters have an alternate Spanish track in 7.1 Dolby, an alternate French track in 5.1 Dolby, and optional English, French and Spanish subtitles, and both have the same special features. There are 7 minutes of sensibly deleted scenes that just stretch things out a little, and 40 minutes of good production featurettes (although they could have used a 'Play All' option) that are filled with behind-the-scenes shots and the different stages of effects imagery as the narration talks about specific story points and characters.

Knight also provides a pretty good commentary track over both the film and the deleted scenes, basically stepping the viewer through the production, explaining where and how each scene was staged, what the motivation was behind the story choices, and how even grandly spectacular effects films have to stay in budget. "The old hallway scene. You never have

Robots (Continued)

enough set in a movie like this. These corridors was basically one big figure eight, and we had multiple, multiple scenes in these corridors, so I had to plan out various different angles and walk-and-talks, so it looked much bigger than it is." Knight succinctly summarizes the effort that went into the film, however, near the end of the featurettes. "When I see it with the final effects, the final music, the final color grading, it reminds me why I wanted to do this in the first place, because at the end of the day, I'm just a fan that wants to sit in a movie theater and see giant mechs fight giant monsters."

Breathless

French pop songs are designed to be sung by people who smoke. Specifically, by people who smoke unfiltered French cigarettes, at least three packs a day, and more while they are recording. The songs are constructed to be belted out in little short phrases, enabling the singers to suck in some oxygen, and perhaps some lingering nicotine, between each phrase, with the option of hitting the notes if they can, or talking their way through it if they need to gather more strength. We could go down an entire list of songs and singers that conform to this pattern (*La Vie en Rose*, par exemple), but why not just check out **Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well and Living in Paris**, which has been issued on Blu-ray by The American Film Theatre and Kino Classics through Kino Lorber Incorporated (UPC#738329231569, \$30)?

The 1975 film is a fairly straightforward presentation of a popular Off-Broadway cabaret program that was a hit in the late Sixties, using cinema to break up the settings of the numbers a bit more, make their staging a bit more elaborate, and populate the production with a somewhat larger cast. There is no narrative beyond the concept that pretty much the same group of performers are doing the songs regardless of the shifts in setting or decoration. The songs were written by the singer and composer, Brel, who is actually Belgian, and were translated—or at times, reconceived—for English audiences. As a film, it is a bit difficult to look at, because having been conceptualized during the Flower Children era, it has a kind of **Hair** or **Godspell** vibe, a zeitgeist that was already wilting by the time the film appeared. By and large, the performers are anarchic in appearance and manner, and the individual song segments are rarely much different than what one might have seen on a heavily produced variety TV show, embracing or enacting the literal meaning of the translated song. Catchy as hell, the songs all have a sort of staccato rhythm that seems to be building in intensity toward an unreachable release, and that is the film's one saving grace, keeping the viewer/listener in a permanent state of near ecstasy. (It was with great delight that we realized Betty Comden and Adolph Green were imitating Brel, and specifically one of the numbers in the film, when they wrote their song, *Veronique*, for another Broadway show.)

As irritating as the film is to watch, you return to it again and again, without regret, because the music, even though it is garishly recorded, is captivating. In a stroke of great fortune, Brel also appears in the film for one number, the one song that is performed in French, which is beautifully contrasted to the rest of the movie in its simplicity and directness. Running 97 minutes, the film is a document of cultural history rather than the eternal monument it could have been, but home video has unquestionably contributed to what durability it has, and therein lies the best story of all regarding the Blu-ray.

We reviewed Kino's DVD release in Nov 03. A technician who worked on that original DVD transfer, Bret Wood, became so obsessed with it that he now, along with supervising the new transfer, supplies a commentary track about Brel and the film. The film's cinematography is a product of its era and attitude, and is in its own way anarchic, with heavy grain at times, and overly saturated hues, but, letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1, the BD presentation is sharper, brighter and even smoother than the nice-looking DVD. The monophonic sound is also fuller and better detailed, although it still works best if you do not amplify it too greatly, even as every bone, muscle and ligament in your body wants you to. The program comes with the 6-minute overview of the short-lived American Film Theatre project that accompany all of Kino's AFT releases, and the 26-minute interview with producer Edie Landau that was included on the DVD. There is no captioning.

Wood's son, Addison Wood, has inserted comments about specific songs, explaining the lyrical content and how the meanings have been altered, sometimes a lot and sometimes not so much, from Brel's original lyrics (which were often focused quite specifically on the area in Belgium where Brel grew up).

Brel does an excellent job talking about the show and its creators, Mort Shuman and Elly Stone, and how they went on to do the movie with director Denis Héroux. He goes into detail about the cast and the crew, about Brel, and about the critical reactions to both the stagemovie and the film. He doesn't hold back when it comes to the film's many shortcomings, even as he tries to place those shortcomings in the perspective of what the film was trying to accomplish. "This sequence is giving us a heaping helping of surrealism, of pop art. We've already had a taste of hippie culture woven into Brel's songs, something that is notably absent from the French originals. To me though, hippie culture, surrealism and pop art are not one in the same, they're not interchangeable, so its odd to have them all blended together to try to make **Alive and Well** appeal to a more contemporary audience. To put Brel's music in hippie drag, beads and long hair, in order to make Jacques Brel cool and groovy is a decision that was, in hindsight, misguided. Time

has not been kind to hippie culture, I'm afraid, and Brel's music is far cooler in its raw form than it is in its 1970s dressed up version."

But he also goes into heartening detail about his own obsession with the material. He explains that the picture and sound elements being transferred were separate entities, and that for the original DVD he worked on the picture first, knowing nothing about the film, the show upon which it was based, or Brel. "As we were watching these silent images, all I could think of is, 'Who are these...'—I don't want to say non-photogenic, let's just say—'atypical performers, compared to the Hollywood beauty standard at the time, and what is the meaning of all this semi-psychedelic imagery butting up against these more naturalistic musical sequences?' Visually speaking, the film made no sense because it has no structure or consistency or continuity. It wasn't until much later that I saw the picture married to the sound, and then I began to understand it, even though the groovy 1970s visuals hadn't aged any better. They were still cringe inducing. At least I could appreciate that this clash of styles was intentional. Just as Mort Shuman and Elly Stone didn't want the stage production to lead the viewer through an artificially constructed narrative, the film embraced the same, almost random organization of the songs. And the film doubled down on this approach by presenting the songs in radically different visual styles. So as much as I may complain about the heavy-handed imagery and saying that the scenes haven't aged very gracefully, I understand that this was the high concept of the whole movie. And after I had watched it a couple of times, I got the album of the original cast recording and fell in love with that. And then started working my way back to the Jacques Brel originals. And that's really a great way to get into his music, if you're not a French speaker, especially. Let this movie be your gateway drug, your musical marijuana, if you will. It will give you a taste of the promise of something harder, and eventually you'll work your way into pure, uncut Brel, and you'll be hooked for life."

Brel, incidentally, died of lung cancer at the age of 49.

Sound is hear to stay!

A major early milestone in the eruption of sound on film, the 1928 Warner Bros. gangster movie, **Lights of New York**, has been released by Warner Home Video as an *Archive Collection* title (UPC#888574651688, \$22). Running 57 minutes and despite a few identifying title cards, the film is truly an "all talking" film, and was apparently the first to commit itself to telling a story entirely through dialog. That's all the movie does, but it is enough to warrant a look by the curious. It has none of the dynamism that made the second Best Picture Oscar winner, **The Broadway Melody**, such an amazing accomplishment for its day, but you have to start somewhere. If **Don Juan** was sending up the dog, **The Jazz Singer** was the first man in space, and **Broadway Melody** was the moon landing, then **Lights of New York** was the first to circle the moon. It is hard to believe that stage actors of the day were as stiff and unimaginative as the movie's cast is, even immobile stage actors. If that were true, audiences for theatrical programs must have been sleeping in the aisles. The rehearsal time put in before each scene also seems to be minimal, although the many flubbed lines and false starts are about the only instances of real liveliness the drama has to offer. That said, the story is coherent and proceeds with a workable momentum, and some of the performances are a bit more personable than others. Cullen Landis and Eugene Pallette are suburban investors who are talked into opening a barbershop in the city that is actually a front for a speakeasy. Their gangster partners end up killing a cop and trying to frame the two heroes, but a chorus girl in love with Landis' character gives him a head's up, leading to a final confrontation. Since part of the film is set in a nightclub, there are a couple of serviceable song and dance numbers to give the movie a little flair, and the film essentially created a reliable template and spirit for many Warner features to come. Seen 90 years after it was made, the film may not be consistently involving on a dramatic level, but the production is always fascinating and is well worth seeing to understand how the movies matured into what they are today.

The full screen black-and-white picture is in reasonably good condition, all things considered. There is some wear around the edges and a few stray speckles, but the presentation is not too badly damaged and the image is reasonably sharp. The monophonic sound is workably clear, too. There is no captioning.

Four Vitaphone musical shorts have also been included, all of which are in good condition with a clear picture and strong sound. The best is the 8-minute *A Breeze from the South* from 1928 featuring Gilbert Wells. Wells is a strong vocalist with good dance moves, and he even plays the clarinet. Without blackface, he evokes an African-American performance

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style in a relatively subtle manner, and was essentially ahead of his time. The Crooners' *Melodious Moments* from 1928, running 8 minutes, is more in keeping with the era, a male harmonizing trio with piano accompaniment that has some energy but remains defined by their ukuleles. Even less energetic is the female harp group—three harps, a violin and a warbley singer—featured in the 6-minute *A Musicale Melange* with The Kjerulf's Mayfair Quintette from 1929, who plod their way through several highbrow numbers without any particular flair beyond a basic adeptness at working their instruments. The most problematic piece is the 9-minute *The Cowboy and the Girl* from 1928 featuring Ray Mayer and Edith Evans. Evans appear for three numbers and is a fairly strong singer, but Mayer, a pianist wearing a cowboy hat, is less talented and takes up a lot of time with his uninteresting solos. He also has an annoying personality, and we would not be surprised if he was eventually found with the piano tipped over on top of him. Nobody would blame Evans if they'd seen the short.

Classic Hearts

Philippe De Broca's charming 1964 tale about an empty town overrun by the inhabitants of a local asylum, *The King of Hearts*, has been released on Blu-ray by Cohen Media and eOne Entertainment (UPC#74195-2839392, \$26). Set during World War I, Alan Bates is a British soldier sent ahead to the town to find the time bomb that had motivated the town's citizens to evacuate. Geneviève Bujold, Michel Serrault, Jean-Claude Brially and Pierre Brasseur are among the inmates, and Adolfo Celi, plays a British officer. The movie became a cult hit, gradually earning its reputation by word of mouth for its charm and sense of escape. The inmates dress up and take on various social roles in a kind of exaggerated manner, presenting and embodying their perception of the town's hierarchy, augmented by the animals of an abandoned circus. Bates' character, initially hiding from the Germans, fits right in, and the more he understands what the inmates are attempting to achieve, the more he begins to identify with them. Cued by a memorable and toy like Georges Delerue musical score, the film initially seems like an absurd and clownish comedy, but it remains true to its atmosphere and most viewers cannot resist being charmed by its lessons.

The presentation runs 102 minutes and utilizes the extended ending that appeared on some earlier home video releases, but was not part of the original American theatrical release. Sure, it is a little more complete, concluding with a quotable line of dialog uttered by Brially, but the freeze frame that was used to conclude the American version was so perfect that it is difficult to let go of it when you see the moment pass. It was a better ending.

Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1, the color transfer is a welcome improvement over the overly dark DVD (Sep 01), which had no 16:9 enhancement. The cinematography has some natural grain, but fleshtones are accurate, hues are bright, and the lighting is precise during the day and the night. The film is mostly in French with some English passages, and the presentation avoids the 'double dubbing' that occurred on earlier prints, while providing unsuppressible English subtitling for the French and German dialog. The monophonic sound is fine and the music is clear. Along with two trailers, there is a good 25-minute interview with cinematographer Pierre Lhomme, who oversaw the image transfer and talks about the film and his long relationship with De Broca, and a lovely 14-minute interview with Bujold, who talks about how she got started in films, her memories of working on the feature, and her experiences with its cult status over the years.

Film critic Wade Major supplies a workable commentary track. While he spends a lot of time reacting to what occurs on the screen, he does fit in the backgrounds of the artists involved and provides an insightful analysis of the film's meanings ("What is sanity? Are these people, who treat each other so well, are they the insane people? These people who have so much fun, who find joy in life, who live every moment to it's fullest? Or are the sane people the ones who are blowing up the world and killing each other, and who find no moral apprehension in that whatsoever? That's the great question. Everybody has a uniform in this movie, and a uniform defines you. The soldiers have chosen their uniforms, but the inmates have not chosen theirs. Unlike those who have chosen to diminish their individuality by joining some warring collective, the inmates are shedding their uniforms, the uniforms that were imposed upon them, and they are now going to express themselves through chosen identities. We don't know them based upon the level of their sanity or lack thereof, we know them based on whom they've chosen to be, and there's something very endearing about that.") and De Broca's masterful artistry. "It is also important to underline just how good De Broca is at staging a scene with many, many characters, without chopping it up. He's able to stage events, conversation scenes, parties, whatever you might have, but he's able to stage them so that we have three, four, five, six, seven characters in the frame at once, moving through the frame at once, so that the performances are uninterrupted and so that we experience the chemistry and the character of all of these individuals in a natural comedic rhythm. In a film where absurdist comedy is sort of your currency for dealing with the audience, it's very easy to wreck that when you do too many takes, when you start to cut it up, when the editing intrudes on the natural comedic rhythm of the actors, when they are acting off each other in the moment. De Broca is very, very willing to trust his collaborators. All of these scenes, most of these very complicated moments, he allows things to just simply happen. He goes with the chemistry of the actors. He goes with the skills of the actors. He lets the actors be his guide, and he lets the cinematography and the editing follow the performances."

Visit to a Romanian monastery

The movies give us many pleasures and one quite prominent joy is the ability they provide to visit other parts of the world and to see how other people live. The terrific 158-minute Romanian drama, *Beyond the Hills*, a Criterion Collection Blu-ray (UPC#715515214919, \$40), is entertaining for its unstoppable story, which just keeps moving and moving and moving, so that you really don't want the film to be over when the story finally comes to an end (quite delightfully, with a splattering of mud from the 'real' world). But the film, directed by Cristian Mungiu, is also about a group of nuns living in a somewhat remote monastery run by a surprisingly clearheaded priest, and the portrait of their subsistence is just as fascinating as the problems that occur when a troubled young woman comes to visit one of the nuns, her childhood friend, and pretty much brings the whole place crashing down by the time the film is over. The performances are vivid, as is the impressive handheld widescreen cinematography. Although it is only a few miles out of town, the church has no electricity and only a well for water. Among the film's other pleasures, the time passes from fall to winter as the story proceeds, and every nuanced step in the changing environment is felt, both outdoors and inside. The DTS sound also has an excellent dimensionality and elaborate separation effects (although, if we were to quibble, we'd offer that the brilliant sound designers fail to replicate the dampening effect that a large snowfall has on the aural ambiance). It is the drama that keeps the viewer attentive, but it is the locale that makes the experience of watching the film so worthwhile. You can cross visiting Romanian monasteries off your bucket list without having to leave your living room.

The outstanding handheld cinematography is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The transfer is precise, and while the film's décor is often drab, the colors are exact and the visions they facilitate are always captivating. The film is in Romanian with optional English subtitles and comes with a trailer.

The four additional special features are excellent. First, there is a 36-minute production documentary, a chronologically organized collection of behind the scenes footage narrated by Mungiu, who teaches as he shares. "When the action is static, the camera just calmly records [the scene]. When the shot involves several different actions, the camera follows them all and indirectly contributes to the rhythm. This greatly complicates how you stage very dynamic sequences. In every sequence, the characters' movements must be such that by following them, the most relevant information is revealed to viewers. At the same time, the characters' actions must make sense. During [the drama's] first crisis, the speaking characters were standing at a considerable distance from each other. A shot wide enough to include all those speaking characters would have been completely lacking in tension. I instead chose a very tight frame, which involved complex choreography for the actors, as if passing a baton from one to the next. This allowed the camera to cross the entire set in a natural way as it followed the action." Next is a 36-minute talk in which Mungiu explains how he came to make the film, what he wanted to accomplish, and how people reacted to what he had done. Additionally, there is a 53-minute panel interview at Cannes with Mungiu and several cast members, featuring a mix of innocuous questions and worthwhile queries.

Finally, there are 20 minutes of terrific deleted and extended scenes. Sometimes deleted scenes will be baffling. We'll see what is basically a decent movie by a respected director but we will have had reservations about some of his decisions in his career, and that will be amplified by what he chose to leave out of his film when the material really doesn't seem like it should have been excluded. Here, however, as good as each scene is, it is clear that the sequences did not belong in the completed feature, because in every instance it takes the characters a little too far from their tonal center. Just as taking any frame of film out of the movie would have made it less compelling, putting any of these frames into it would have compromised it as well, even though, superficially, they provide more narrative information and a greater understanding of what the characters are thinking.

The pioneer spirit

A wonderful 1931 MGM epic about the early pioneers, *The Great Meadow*, has been released by Warner Home Video as an *Archive Collection* title (UPC#888574644031, \$22). Running just 79 minutes, the film still has the sweep of a novel as it follows an Eighteenth Century married couple, played by Johnny Mack Brown and Eleanor Boardman, and their companions as they pick up stakes in Virginia and make a perilous journey to Kentucky, battling both the elements and the indigenous natives. Once they arrive, the story shifts into a domestic drama about separation and romantic conflict as the pair try to start their family. Directed by Charles Brabin, the film is remarkably economic, conveying the lengthy journey and hardship with carefully selected long shots and close-ups supplanted by sound effects. The details of early settler life are constantly present—if there is a dramatic scene, for example, one character will be making candles while he talks, and the other will be doing other chores—and the film is highly satisfying for the excitement of its adventure scenes, the 'American Heritage' purity of its drama (Brown's performance is terrific) and the verisimilitude of its production design.

The full screen black-and-white picture has a lot of age-related grain, but is in workable condition, and the monophonic sound is rickety but viable. There is no captioning.

The first course of Spaghetti

Two formative 1965 Spaghetti Westerns made by the same director, with coherent, straightforward narratives, have been combined on the Arrow Academy Blu-ray release, **A Pistol for Ringo & The Return of Ringo: Two Films by Duccio Tessari** (UPC#760137110187, \$40). Giuliano Gemma, also billed as Montgomery Wood, stars in both features. *Pistol* was made concurrent to **A Fistful of Dollars** and **Django**, and is considered one of the founding tone setters for the glorious subgenre. A group of bank robbers being chased by a posse take refuge in a hacienda and hold the inhabitants hostage. Gemma's character is sitting in jail on a murder (in self defense) charge, and offers to go on the inside for a percentage of the recovered loot. The sheriff, whose fiancée is one of the hostages, readily agrees, and the film becomes kind of a **Die Hard** (it is similarly set at Christmas), as the hero surreptitiously knocks off bandits and drives the other ones bananas until the final showdown. Gemma's performance is lighthearted—not quite as jokey as Terence Hill, but along the same lines—and athletic. A lot of the gunfights are cleverly staged, and the story has a solid dramatic arc. The film has an Ennio Morricone musical score, although it says something to the general oracular skills of film composers that the music has a more journeyman Morricone feel, and is much less the masterpiece than his music for **Fistful of Dollars** is. Running 99 minutes, the film is nevertheless enjoyable and involving.

Although it has a lot of the same cast members and Gemma has the same character name, *Return* is set a few years before *Pistol*, and the other cast members are playing entirely different characters than they did in the previous movie. The film has a slightly darker tone, but again, the narrative, evoking the last act of *The Odyssey*, has both clarity and momentum. A Civil War officer believed to be dead returns to his hometown incognito after villains have taken over everything in the pursuit of gold, and one of the main bad guys is getting ready to marry the hero's wife. Running 97 minutes, he systematically upsets their plans and whittles down their number, leading to an elaborate final confrontation. Again, the film's action scenes are inventive, and there is a decent emotional content to the clearly articulated drama, along with another and slightly stronger Morricone musical score.

Both films are letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. On both movies, the image periodically has a mild grain, but is otherwise in excellent condition, with fresh hues and accurate fleshtones. On both, there are moments where the music becomes slightly distorted on the monophonic audio tracks because it is striving for a purity that couldn't be achieved with the audio technology of its day, but otherwise the sound is adequate. Both movies are available in either Italian or English, with optional English subtitles, and on both, we tended to prefer the Italian dialog for its slightly more organic feel. Along with trailers for both movies and a nice collection of promotional materials in still frame, there is a good 38-minute analysis of the two movies by Italian film expert Tony Rayns ("This plot is strikingly different from the Leone plots and strikingly different from other Italian westerns, in that it has very, very little of that visual rhetoric that we now associate with Leone, those dramatic flourishes, visually, the close-ups of people's faces, the extreme close-ups of people's eyes, the emblematic compositions as people stride through this and that. All of the heightened rhetoric that we associate with Italian westerns is pretty much missing in this film. It's a far more conventionally written and conventionally structured drama, which happens to be set in the Old West."), a nice 22-minute retrospective interview with Gemma and co-star Lorella De Luca, who reminisce about the first film and working with the other cast and crew members, including one another, and another 27-minute interview about the second film with De Luca and camera operator Sergio D'Offizi, which is a bit more gossipy and enlightening.

Both movies are also accompanied by rewarding commentaries from Spaghetti Western experts C. Courtney Joyner and Henry Parke. Although they run out of steam a bit on the second film and fall back to describing the action, they are generally quite insightful and knowledgeable about the filmmakers and the unique artistic components that comprise not only these movies, but the movies they spawned. "This film is in many ways just kind of this great template for Euro Westerns in a lot of ways because all of these tremendous faces. It shows very much kind of the community that existed in this talent pool in Spain when these films were made. So it wasn't just a matter of reusing the same actors, not only because they were good, but also because [for] audiences, it almost became like these were the stock company players." That community extended behind the cameras as well, as the directors and crews learned from each other. "It really improved so many films, just watching probably each other work."

They praise the humor that Gemma manages to slip into his performance in the first film without going over the top, noting that quite often, clowning in Spaghetti Westerns could become rather tiresome. "The comedians in a lot of the westerns make Gabby Hayes look restrained." Throughout both films, they deconstruct Tessari's key and climactic sequences, and explain how each component is contributing to the themes of the narrative, as well as to the specific plot requirements. "There's a lot of very smart, very visual storytelling, and I think so many European films kept more in touch with the language, visual language, of silent movies than American films, because they had to deal with the fact that so many foreign languages were going to be involved in the telling that they often kept the

dialog minimum."

We reviewed an elaborate two-platter Twentieth Century Fox DVD release of Sergio Leone's **A Fistful of Dollars**, starring Clint Eastwood, in Aug 07, but now Fox and Kino Lorber Incorporated have released a new *KL Studio Classics* Blu-ray (UPC#738329217396, \$30), retaining the previous special features, including the excellent Christopher Frayling commentary, but offering up a new second commentary track by genre film enthusiast Tim Lucas.

The picture transfer is also upgraded, from the removal of the hair on the upper left at the beginning of the opening titles to far more believable but still quite clear day-for-night segments. Fleshtones are richer and colors are deeper, and while shadows may be darker and lose some detail, it is always for the better. The 5.1 DTS sound is also sharper and more energized. There are optional English subtitles.

As Joyner and Parke point out in their **Ringo** commentary and Lucas reiterates on his talk, Italy did not have television as we know it in the Fifties and Sixties, and so their theatrical film business thrived the way the business thrived in America during the Thirties and Forties. Audiences hungered for 'mindless' genre films and soon enough, the Italians stumbled across the realization that they could make their own westerns with their own sensibilities and the movies could turn a profit domestically. It may have been a trickle in the early Sixties, but there were still enough that Morricone had already done a couple of western scores. The popularity of the *Django* and *Ringo* films, and most of all, of the 1964 **Fistful of Dollars** with its American star, opened the flood gates and, as Lucas estimates, the Italians would go on to make more than five hundred westerns in the following decade or so.

Clearly, the Italians found their 'voice,' and the *Ringo* and *Django* westerns were a significant part of that, but it was **Fistful of Dollars** that crystallized the subgenre and ignited the frenzy. As is also pointed out in the commentaries, the Italian film community wasn't all that big. Pretty much everybody knew everybody, and it was sort of like Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque independently painting virtually the same cubist painting. They were all thinking on the same lines and sharing their ideas during their downtime. They weren't interested in heritage like Hollywood was, but there was a strong theme of social injustice running through the films (as Lucas points out, Morricone based his opening music in **Fistful of Dollars** on a Woody Guthrie song), an appreciation of style and craftsmanship that permeated every level of the industry, and the understanding that to pack theaters, you needed more and bloodier action than the last movie had.

Lucas has a unique voice. Yes, he covers the backgrounds of the cast and crew, but he does so with the understanding that you probably know a lot of the basics already, and he is always sharing information for a reason, not just as a demonstration of his encyclopedic resources. "This shot makes use of a camera crane, which this film couldn't afford to rent. However, Leone very much wanted some crane shots in the picture. Knowing that other studios were closed on Sundays, [cinematographer] Massimo Dallamano arranged to 'borrow' a crane from Dino De Laurentiis, and took care of all the film's crane shots on a single Sunday."

During his talk, Lucas goes so far as to compare Eastwood's character to the Holy Ghost, but his analysis of the film's artistry is always thorough and compelling. "One of the major traits of the Italian westerns that followed **Fistful** is this spiritual ambiguity about the protagonist, which walked hand in hand with a strong anti-clerical stance. Taken as a whole, Italian westerns present priests as human and fallible, churches as corrupt institutions like any other, and leaves the only hope of good to the actions of a selfless individual." It should be noted that Joyner and Parke found distinctive allegorical components in both **Ringo** movies, as well.

"Notice that this opening scene plays out with the dialog heard only at a distance, outside the perimeters of the main story, which has been defined by Eastwood's laconic presence. We quickly follow his example and learn by observing. This is a film audiences respond to because it makes us think for ourselves. At the same time, it continually surprises us."

The special features carried over from the DVD include the trailers, the radio ads, the 5-minute piece on the film's locations, the 11-minute segment about Leone, the 9-minute interview with Eastwood, and the 23-minute retrospective documentary. The piece about the 8-minute 1977 made-for-TV prolog is included, but it is accompanied by another 6-minute interview with prolog director Monte Hellman. There are several other segments that didn't appear in the earlier DVD, including an outstanding 35-minute montage of promotional materials set to Morricone's music, an extensive 4-minute appreciation of the film by John Badham that seems to get everything wrong, a lovely 33-minute interview with co-star Marianne Koch (who had second billing so the distributors could pretend the story had a romantic interest), and a good 19-minute interview with Frayling about his collection of Leone memorabilia, providing at the same time a fascinating history of the film's marketing.

The newspaper business

Steven Spielberg should be ashamed of himself. His 2017 feature, **The Post**, a 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment release (UPC#02454347-0373, \$30), opens with a title card that reads, "Hau Nghia Province Vietnam 1966," but the music that kicks in is Creedence Clearwater Revival, which wasn't recorded until three years later. Now you could forgive a younger

director for making such an error from the fog of the past, but Spielberg lived through it. The pop music, even the heaviest pop music, of 1966 was very different than the pop music of 1969, and the War was different, too. Much later in the film, there is a marvelous gag in which a young girl is making a fistful of money selling lemonade to the reporters who have gathered at her father's house to secretly distill and write up the papers Daniel Ellsberg lifted from the CIA-contracted company he worked for. It's a laugh out loud moment, but a little bit after that, attention is brought to the money again, spoiling the joke. Other than that, however, the movie is just about perfect, and is as good a historical entertainment as you could ever hope to see. Tom Hanks plays the editor of the Washington Post, desperately trying to play catch up with the New York Times, which was the first paper to get a hold of the documents, but was subsequently prevented from printing them all because of a court injunction. Meryl Streep is the paper's owner, having recently inherited control from her deceased husband and in the process of taking the business public, an action that is placed in extreme jeopardy by the possibility of publishing the papers. It is the choice to make the movie more of her story than the story of Hanks' character that widens the perspective of the event's historical significance. In one of Spielberg's typical over-the-top moments at the conclusion, Streep's character is seen walking down the steps of the Supreme Court, and the segment of the crowd she is stepping through, who are looking upon her admiringly, is exclusively female. No, that didn't happen in real life, but it is a moving evocation of how the long gestating Women's Movement was finally going to shift into high gear, and how female role models who stood up for themselves and their rights were and are the core of that manifest destiny.

Running 116 minutes, the film is highly entertaining, shifting enjoyably between the efforts of the newspaper staff and the pressures being brought to bear on the owner, and it almost feels as if it is intended as a direct prequel to **All the President's Men**, even though Hanks' performance is much warmer and organic than Jason Robards' Oscar-winning, joyously killer turn in the same part. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The image is smooth and nicely lit, seeming to capture a kind of light from the past that is calmer and more subdued than the harsh light of the present. The 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound has a strong dimensionality (Creedence sounds terrific, which adds to the frustration of its anachrony) and clear tones. There is an audio track that describes the action ("A printer pushes a green button. Crisp sheets of newspaper feed through the press in a continuous scroll, bending around corners as they are propelled along by rollers. A light shakes from a steel beam as they rocket past."), alternate French and Spanish audio tracks, optional English, French and Spanish subtitles, a terrific 17-minute piece about the film's wonderful production design that also looks at the amazing way newspapers were printed in the old days, a good 26-minute production featurette, and a passable 8-minute piece on John Williams composing and conducting the musical score.

We first saw Fritz Lang's 1956 RKO Pictures suspense film, **While the City Sleeps**, channel surfing on late night TV. The film was considered an abject failure, proof that the once pantheon-level film director was losing his touch, but we were riveted by both the narrative and the filmmaking prowess that was being exhibited in what was ostensibly a cheap little thriller. We eagerly looked forward to seeing it again, and found repeated satisfaction with both the LD (Mar 92) and the DVD (Jan 15). Warner Home Video has now released the film on Blu-ray as part of the *Warner Archive Collection* (UPC#888574626051, \$22), and we found it to be even more mesmerizing than ever. Since we have already summarized the film twice previously, we will be brief. The owner of a media company passes away and control shifts to his playboy son, one of those great non-horror parts that Vincent Price landed before he found his career niche. The son doesn't want to be involved in the day-to-day operations of the company and so he creates a competition between the heads of the three units, played by Thomas Mitchell, George Sanders and James Craig, promising that whichever unit gets the scoop on the capture of a serial killer will be given operational control over the entire corporation. Dana Andrews is a TV commentator who is friends with the detective heading the investigation, played by Howard Duff. John Barrymore, Jr. is the squeaky killer, a wonderful ahead-of-its-time forensic portrait. Ida Lupino, Sally Forrest, and Rhonda Fleming are also featured in the dazzling cast (Mae Marsh pops up, too). Running 99 minutes, the film's excitement comes from the race to catch the killer, especially when he targets Forrest's character, but the real thrill of the film is its cynical portrait of the media business, and how even the hero is willing to sell his soul to succeed. Every sequence within the film, except, perhaps, the tacked on epilog, is carefully and thoughtfully staged, so that text and subtext spill forward in shot after shot. It is a brilliant work that, in hindsight, shows Lang in full command of his talent and artistic sensibility.

The black-and-white transfer appears to be identical to the DVD, which may not be such a good thing, since the enhanced sharpness of the BD delivery magnifies the shortcomings of the source material. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2:1, masking off at least one important story point that was visible on the less severely letterboxed LD. Generally, the image looks sharp, with well defined contrasts, but there are

times when the image becomes distinctively softer, which is all the more noticeable because Lang's choices are so precise. There is also periodic grain that may have been inevitable because of RKO's bumpy history, but again is more pronounced because of the magnification provided by the BD presentation and the brilliance of Lang's vision. The monophonic sound is solid and clear, and there are optional English subtitles. An enthusiastic trailer is included that counts down all of the stars.

An older film about reporters covering a crime that is also insightful and engagingly counter-intuitive, the 1932 First National production, **The Famous Ferguson Case**, has been issued on DVD as a *Warner Archive* title (UPC#888574657529, \$22). A wealthy banker in a small New England town is murdered one night and his unfaithful wife is found bound and gagged nearby. A young local reporter hustles on the story and gets a scoop, and when the wife is arrested, big city reporters flood the town. The pre-Code depictions of infidelity and other untoward behavior are refreshing. Running 74 minutes, the film isn't so much about solving the murder, however, as it is about how lazy and cynical the big city reporters are and what the hero learns about his chosen vocation. It is because of this focus that the movie, directed by Lloyd Bacon, remains timeless and engaging. Joan Blondell, as one of the city reporters, has top billing, but the movie is really more of an ensemble piece, with Tom Brown as the young hero.

The full screen black-and-white picture is aged but workable, and the monophonic sound is adequate. There is no captioning. A trailer is included implying that the film is based upon a true story (if it is, it is long forgotten) and divvying out some classic hyperbole ("It's the most amazing expose of modern life ever screened!").

Guilt trip

Frank Borzage's gorgeously composed tale of love and guilt, **Moonrise**, has been released on Blu-ray with an exquisite black-and-white image transfer by the Criterion Collection (UPC#715515214414, \$40). Dane Clark stars in the 1948 Republic Pictures feature as a young man struggling to maintain his sense of pride in the small backwoods town where he grew up. Lloyd Bridges is a wealthier peer and bully, and the two get into a fight one evening during a dance. In a rage, Clark's character kills Bridges' character and, haunted by the fate of his own father, who had been hung for murder when Clark's character was a child, he hides the body in a swamp. He also takes up with girlfriend of Bridges' character, played by Gail Russell, and then begins to sweat it out as the amiable sheriff, played by Allyn Joslyn, starts piecing together what happened. Normally, such a story would be mostly a downer, with or without its spiritual overtones. Even though the performances are appealing and there is what can be construed as a happy ending, spending time with the characters might feel emotionally draining and intrusive, but every shot, every frame of film, is utterly captivating. The cinematography, by John L. Russell, and the production design, by Lionel Banks, are continually riveting, lit to bring out textures and environmental details that pull you right into each setting. The full screen image is spotless, and dazzling. You feel as trapped as Clark's character, but in a good way, unable to extract yourself from the seduction of the movie's world as the narrative leads you further and further into damnation.

Ethel Barrymore, Henry Morgan and Rex Ingram are also featured. The monophonic sound is also reasonably strong, and there are optional English subtitles. The one special feature is an excellent 17-minute conversation between two film historians, Hervé Dumont and Peter Cowie, about Borzage and the film.

Wonderful Heart

A wonderful and mostly forgotten comedy about a family of con artists who are themselves charmed by the pure benevolence of an elderly woman, **The Young in Heart**, has been released on Blu-ray by Kino Lorber Incorporated as a *KL Studio Classics* title (UPC#738329228248, \$20). The 1938 David O. Selznick feature was directed by Richard Wallace and is set in Europe, although it was clearly shot in California. The marvelous **Topper** team of Roland Young and Billie Burke are former stage actors who pretend to be a retired British military couple, with Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. and Janet Gaynor as their adult children. All four of them work the resorts on the Riviera trying to score through matrimony or card games or whatever. They meet the lonely, elderly widow, played by Minnie Dupree, and make arrangements to move into her mansion in England. To seal the scam, they begin to act respectably. Young's character finds a job as a car salesman, a vocation for which he is ideally suited, and Fairbanks' character gets a job at an engineering firm, working for an attractive boss played by Paulette Goddard. What makes the story work so well is that almost immediately after meeting Dupree's character, the consciences of the heroes begin to get the best of them, and while their impulses are always for the quick score, the more they think about the long game, the more they begin to conform to genuine moral values, at least superficially. But that is the brilliant idea behind the 91-minute feature, which is based upon a stageplay. The show is appealing because the characters are appealing, but its lesson is the most appealing thing of all—that you will find greater rewards conforming to time than you will ever find trying to undermine it.

The full screen black-and-white picture looks immaculate. The image is sharp and free of wear. The monophonic sound is okay and there are

Criterion Cowboy

We reviewed an elaborate two-platter 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment DVD release of the 1969 United Artists Oscar winner, John Schlesinger's Midnight Cowboy, in Apr 06. The Criterion Collection has now ventured forth with a Blu-ray release (UPC#715515215312, \$40) featuring a new image transfer supervised by cinematographer Adam Holender. Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1, the image preserves each phase of the 113-minute film perfectly, from the slightly washed out Texas sequences to the grimy and grainy New York street shots, and on to the brightly colored Florida sequences. When seen by itself, the DVD looks terrific, but in a direct comparison, the image is much softer, and the colors and textures are not as consistent within each segment. The monophonic sound is also sharp and solid, bringing a lot more power and detail to the audio track than what the DVD could muster, even with its remastered stereo track. There are optional English subtitles.

Criterion has retained the primary special features from the DVD, including the commentary featuring producer Jerome Hellman, 40 minutes of retrospective interviews, and a trailer. Additionally, there is a 9 minute promotional featurette that was shot during the film's production (promising, quite presciently, that the unknown Jon Voight will become as famous as Dustin Hoffman), Voight's 7-minute audition tape in which he does a lot of desperate but successful improvising, an interesting 15-minute interview with Schlesinger that is more about Sunday Bloody Sunday than Cowboy (and about Schlesinger's sexuality), a great 14-minute interview from a 1970 episode of The David Frost Show in which Voight provides quite a bit of biographical information as well as sharing stories about how he arrived at his accent, and a highly entertaining selection of excerpts running 33 minutes from a 2002 testimonial for Schlesinger that includes terrific reminiscences by Hoffman, Voight and others. A good 14-minute talk by photographer Michael Childers is accompanied by his photos. He takes credit for a couple of things in the movie, such as the opening shot of the drive-in theater, and shares his memories of being on the set and what the people were like. Holender, who was originally from Poland, supplies a 25-minute talk, discussing his career and the challenges of getting the American crews to support his vision. He also talks in great detail about his strategies for the looks of the film's different components. Finally, there is an excellent 57-minute profile of screenwriter Waldo Salt from 1990 that goes over his entire career but contains quite a bit about the creation of Midnight Cowboy, which was a major turning point for him. There is a lot of interview footage with Salt, and some frank assessments about his life and the choices he made.

Wacky Orchid

People who watch movies on a casual basis might very well notice nothing, but anybody who has a passion for movies will become ecstatic as the wacky, weird and wild 1948 crime feature, No Orchids for Miss Blandish, a Euro London Films Ltd Kino Lorber Incorporated KL Studio Classics Blu-ray (UPC#738329227715, \$25), begins to unfold. Presented in black-and-white, which generally looks terrific on the Blu-ray, with crisp contrasts and smooth blacks, adding greatly to the film's attractions, a New York gangster kidnaps an heiress with plans to ask for a ransom, but faster than you can say, 'Stockholm Syndrome,' they fall madly in love with one another. After a period of blissful cohabitation, however, not only does the law close in on them, but the gangster's own cohorts become upset over the lost payday. Sounds like a normal film noir classic, right? Well, first off, the film was made in Britain. The cast all talk American, except they don't. It's a bizarre, flat accent, like each cast member is carefully avoiding the pitfalls of sounding British, but speaking too precisely even if they are getting the vowels right on a technical level. A twinge of Brooklyn or The Bronx, or even New Jersey? Fuggedaboutit.

Then, there's all the sex. Yes, Britain had censorship, but their standards of what was okay and what wasn't okay was way different than what was okay and not okay in American movies. A private detective doesn't want a female witness to leave the room, so he pulls her belt off and her pants start to fall down. She grabs them quick enough, but it stops her from running away or using her hands for anything else, and he's pretty pleased with himself for having thought of it. This is after he's outside on a ledge and gets a full view of her removing her top as she changes into her nightclothes. The gangster and the heiress are clearly doing more than having coffee and bacon in the morning, as well. But when they go back to the gangster's nightclub and pause to watch the show before getting out of town, the heiress, who was a popular socialite and must have known her way around such establishments, watches the floorshow as if she'd never seen anything like it before in her life. Played by Linden Travers, she looks on with an expression of amazement and rapture, and it can't just be the leftover effects of the bacon, because the club's floor manager, aware that the cops are on their way and everything is going to come crashing down momentarily, also has to pause before alerting his boss because the climax of the floorshow is just too good to interrupt, or so his expression suggests. The boss is played by Jack La Rue, who works so hard trying to do a Humphrey Bogart imitation that you would be cringing in despair if the rest of the movie weren't so outrageous that he fits right in.

Running 103 minutes, the narrative rushes forwards in leaps and bounds, rather like an Italian thriller where the story deliberately cuts ahead and ahead and ahead with no more than the barest of information given out to

piece together what sort of turn it has taken. There is also violence galore (the fact that the heiress is head over heels for the gangster after watching him gun someone down in cold blood says a lot about her taste in men, although her father is a banker, so maybe that explains it). In any case, the film never slows down long enough to stop you from thinking anything more than 'What? Oh my God. What? Oh my God,' as each new plot turn occurs. In one scene, two characters meet in a cheap restaurant, except that, because the film had only one production designer, the cheap restaurant has the same artwork on its wallpaper that the nightclub has. It's stuff like that which will pass right over the heads of casual viewers trying their hardest just to keep up with the plot, but will be nectar and wine for film connoisseurs, who can take delight not only in the movie's own drama, but in the story of how the absurd film was created, which can be readily pieced together by all of the clues flickering across the screen.

The monophonic sound is solid and there is no captioning. A trailer is also included.

Colorful drama

Ralph Meeker is a vet suffering from PTSD and Janice Rule is his wife, the titular character in the gorgeous 1956 Republic Trucolor feature, A Woman's Devotion, released on Blu-ray by Paramount and Kino Lorber Incorporated as a KL Studio Classics title (UPC#738329226688, \$20). The pair are vacationing in Acapulco and Meeker's character is gradually re-establishing his career as an artist, but he suffers from blackouts and when a potential model is murdered, the suspicion falls on him. Shot on location, Paul Henreid directed the film, and also has a major supporting part as the local police detective looking into the murder. Running 88 minutes, the film holds no real surprises and has what one might euphemistically term a boxoffice downer for an ending, but the colors are fabulous. The cops drive around in a bright red police car, and when it fills the screen, you don't care what happens in the plot. Fleshtones are scrumptious, and fiesta hues are everywhere. The image is somewhat grainy and there is a stray marking here and there, but so long as you don't get too close to the screen, everything looks fantastic. The presentation is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1 (not 2.35:1 as is erroneously listed on the jacket), and the monophonic sound is okay. There is no captioning.

Messy comedy

A ghastly Italian comedy that had with some American input—the screenplay is by Luigi Magni and Larry Gelbart—The Chastity Belt, has been released by Warner Home Video as an Archive Collection title (UPC#883316467343, \$22). The first part of the 1969 production, which was also known, according to the fine print on the back of the jacket, as On My Way to the Crusades I Met a Girl Who..., seems like it is flailing away, trying to find humor in rape. Running 93 minutes, it does eventually morph into a romance, but only viewers with a passion for wrongheaded cinema are going to have the patience for it. Set during the Crusades—the Italian locations are one of the film's few selling points—Tony Curtis is a knight who marries a peasant he has the hots for, played by Monica Vitti, but is then called away to war before he can consummate his marriage. He leaves some protection in place so nobody else can replace him in his absence, and goes off with the key. She follows to retrieve it and they fall in love all over again. Meanwhile, a sultan played with bug eyed delight by Hugh Griffith kidnaps the two of them, and is subsequently frustrated by the presence of the belt. And so on. Directed by Pasqual Festa Campanile, the film's attempts at physical humor have clear cultural limitations, but it is really the arbitrarily shifting emotions of the heroes that undercut whatever skills at comical timing the cast attempts to manifest. Overall, the film is a mess. Some viewers will be happy with the Italian influences (there is a cheerful score by Riz Ortolani), the fleeting maybe-we-can-get-a-spread-in-Playboy nudity or the stars (Curtis has a full beard throughout the film), but most who put it on will feel it wasn't worth the effort.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. Colors are bright, fleshtones are accurate and the image is sharp, but there are fleeting scratches and splices from time to time. The monophonic sound is tolerable and there is no captioning.

Blondell & Farrell

The marvelous pair of Joan Blondell and Glenda Farrell are conjoined with the equally engaging Robert Armstrong and Hugh Herbert in the mostly enjoyable 1934 romantic comedy, Kansas City Princess, a Warner Home Video Archive Collection title (UPC#888574657697, \$22). The ending commits a cardinal sin of letting the bad guys get the best of the heroes, but otherwise the film is an enjoyable romp. After some chasing around at the beginning, the two women try to help Herbert's character get the goods on his unfaithful wife, while Armstrong's character, a gangster who thinks Blondell's character has been unfaithful to him, eventually gets roped into helping them with their scheme. Running 64 minutes, the film is basically a parade of funny sequences (One character takes out a gun, and the other says, "Put that away, you'll cut yourself."), each segment leading to the next, and while it would have been more enjoyable if they led to a more rewarding climax, the pleasures along the way will be sufficient for most fans.

The full screen black-and-white picture is a bit worn, but workable, and the monophonic sound is okay. There is no captioning.

Dynamic hostage drama

For it's age, the 1936 MGM production, **Absolute Quiet**, a Warner Home Video *Archive Collection* release (UPC#888574657420, \$22), is a fairly decent hostage drama with a number of engaging character dynamics. Lionel Atwill is a financier who is spending some time at his ranch, which has a makeshift landing strip. On a very foggy night, a plane carrying the governor, played by Raymond Walburn, has to make an emergency landing, while at the same time, a pair of fugitives, played by Bernadene Hays and Wallace Ford, find their way to the ranch hoping to swap cars, and eventually realize that the governor could grant them clemency. There are a number of other characters at the ranch and on the plane, as well, all of whom know one another. Each has a different agenda and a different set of values. Running 70 minutes, the film, directed by George B. Seitz, mixes up the characters and the conflicts quite nicely, and brings everything to a reasonably satisfying conclusion. While the beef that the financier had with the governor is not played out as industriously as promised, most of the other resentments and animosities are given plenty of attention, and Walburn's character pays for his sins in other ways. And the more venal the characters seem, the more the Hays and Ford characters, although hardened killers, become sympathetic.

The full screen black-and-white picture is in decent condition, with modest wear. Speckles and scratches are fairly common, but the image is usually sharp and details are clear. The monophonic sound is fine. There is no captioning, and a trailer that gives away the ending is included.

Pre-war spy thriller

A pre-war spy thriller that was part of Warner Bros.' patriotic efforts to drum up support for America's vigilance, **Espionage Agent**, has been released by Warner Home Video as an *Archive Collection* title (UPC# 888574657505, \$22). Joel McCrae—soon to show up in **Foreign Correspondent**, to which this 1939 feature would make a viable companion—is a young State Department employee who is trained in what would eventually be known as intelligence gathering, and then falls in love with a spy who, fortunately, falls in love with him, as well. Brenda Marshall co-stars. They go to Switzerland and then put on a show of marital discord to fool the Germans and get the 'only complete list of foreign agents working in America.' Running 83 minutes, the film has greater potential than what it delivers, but it has some decent moments of suspense and a solid romance at its core. Additionally, it delivers not only atmosphere, but a fairly good snapshot of what is now largely forgotten, the widespread hesitancy America had in becoming involved with the conflict in Europe before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. It's a good thing Warner Bros. was around to keep us on the right course.

The full screen black-and-white picture is a bit soft, but is generally in passable condition, and the monophonic sound is okay. There is no captioning, and a trailer is included.

Racing thrills

Back before the movies had to become so darn realistic, MGM's 1939 **Burn 'Em Up O'Connor** is a marvelous racing car movie in which the vengeful bad guy is secretly blinding the drivers on a racing team. Most of them crash, but the hero has memorized the track blindfolded and wins the race despite not being able to see anything. Great stuff, right? But you couldn't get away with it today. They don't drive those little cigar shaped cars any more, either.

Running 70 minutes, the Warner Home Video *Archive Collection* release (UPC#888574657475, \$22) has plenty of good racing sequences and is a fairly enjoyable exercise. Dennis O'Keefe is the whiz kid driver, Nat Pendleton is his loyal sidekick and Harry Carey is the team owner. Naturally, there's a girl, with Cecilia Parker filling the role. The movie may not be **Red Line 7000**, let alone **Grand Prix**, but it would fit right in if someone were programming a festival of such features, and is reasonably entertaining if you don't take its hijinks too seriously.

The full screen black-and-white picture is in passable shape, with minimal wear and a bit of speckling, and the monophonic sound is fine. There is no captioning, and a trailer is included. The film opens with the heroes watching a newsreel report about a car race, and so it is inevitable that the trailer opens like a newsreel, only using footage from the movie.

DVD News

INDEX AVAILABLE: Our annual Index to the DVD and BD reviews in The DVD-Laser Disc Newsletter, identifying all titles reviewed between Apr 97 and Jun 18, can be obtained for \$20 by writing DVD-LDN Index, PO Box 420, East Rockaway NY 11518. An addendum to last year's Index, covering all reviews from Jul 17 to Jun 18, is available for \$2.00. You can also receive a downloaded version of the complete Index for free. Just email dpratt@dvdslaser.com and indicate if you would like the Index in PDF format or Microsoft Word format. A complete set of Back Issues, from Sep 84 to last month, is available on two DVD-ROMs for \$64.95 plus \$3 S&H US, \$8 S&H foreign. Write to: Back Issues, DVD-LDN, PO Box 420, East Rockaway NY 11518

2K1 IN 4K: Warner Home Video will be releasing **2001: A Space Odyssey** in 4K format on October 30.

CRITERION CORNER: Olivier Assayas's **Cold Water** will feature an interview with Assayas; an interview with cinematographer Denis Lenoir; and an excerpt from a 1994 French television program on the film featuring Assayas and actors Virginie Ledoyen and Cyprien Fouquet. Ingmar Bergman's **Scenes from a Marriage** will have both the long TV version and the shorter theatrical version, and will feature an interview with Bergman from 1986; interviews from 2003 with Liv Ullmann and Erland Josephson; and an interview from 2003 with Bergman scholar Peter Cowie comparing the two versions. Gregory La Cava's enjoyable **My Man Godfrey** will include a piece about the film with jazz and film critic Gary Giddins; a discussion about La Cava with critic Nick Pinkerton; outtakes; a *Lux Radio Theatre* adaptation of the film from 1938, starring William Powell, Carole Lombard, Gail Patrick, and Mischa Auer; and newsreels from the Thirties documenting the class divide during the Great Depression. Daniel Petrie's adaptation of **A Raisin in the Sun** will have an interview from 1961 with playwright and screenwriter Lorraine Hansberry; an interview with Imani Perry, author of *Looking for Lorraine*, on the real-life events on which the play is based; an episode of *Theater Talk* from 2002 featuring producer Philip Rose, Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis; an excerpt from *The Black Theatre Movement: From "A Raisin in the Sun" to the Present*, a 1978 documentary, with a new introduction by director Woodie King Jr.; and an interview with film scholar Mia Mask, editor of *Poitier Revisited*. Andrei Tarkovsky's epic **Andrei Rublev** will have both the 185-minute version and the 205-minute version, and will come with **Steamroller and Violin**, Tarkovsky's 1961 student thesis film; *The Three Andreis*, a 1966 documentary about the writing of the film's script; **On the Set of Andrei Rublev**, a 1966 documentary about the making of the film; an interview with actor Nikolai Burlyayev and cinematographer Vadim Yusov by filmmakers Seán Martin and Louise Milne; an interview with film scholar Robert Bird; selected-scene commentary from 1998 featuring film scholar Vlada Petric; and a video essay by filmmaker Daniel Raim.

ARCHIVES UPDATE: The following titles have recently been issued as part of the Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment *Fox Cinema Archives*—**Fresh Off the Boat Season 3, Fresh Off the Boat Season 4, The Last Man on Earth Season 2, The Last Man on Earth Season 3, The Last Man Standing Season 5, The Last Man Standing Season 6, Life in Pieces Season 1, Life in Pieces Season 2, The Mick Season 1, The Mick Season 2, New Girl Season 6, Queen of the South Season 2, and Snowfall Season 1.**

ARCHIVE UPDATE: The following titles have recently been issued as part of the Warner Home Video *Archive Collection*—**Baby Face Harrington, The Band Plays On, The Chaser, The Colossus of Rhodes (Blu-ray), Designing Woman (Blu-ray), Kid Nightingale, Living Single Season 5, The Man from Down Under, A Modern Hero, My Past, Perfect Strangers Season 4, Seven Brides for Seven Brothers (Blu-ray), Step by Step Season 1, Super Fly (Blu-ray), Tender Comrade, and Two Weeks in Another Town (Blu-ray).**

CLOSED OUT OF TOWN: The following titles have been removed from our *Coming Attractions* listing—*The Force, InSei The Power of Intuition, Bugs, Boys, A Girl, September Morning, Two Female Spies with Flowered Panties, Women in Heat behind Bars, A Touch of Sex, Helena, Don't Tell Mama I'm, Naughty College School Girls 2, The Mighty Atom, and A Blast.*

NEW IN BLU: The following titles have recently been released on Blu-ray—*A Wrinkle in Time (Buena Vista); Freak Show (Cinedigm); Bowling for Columbine, El Sur, Female Trouble, Manila in the Claws of Light, The Virgin Spring (Criterion); The Banishment, Disorganized Crime, Gross Anatomy, I Jane Doe, Jack the Giant Killer, Jacques Brel Is Alive and Living in Paris, Keep the Change, The Late Great Planet Earth, The Maids, The Martian Chronicles, Miracles, The Pink Panther Cartoon Collection V.2, The Return, Spetters, The Woman in the Window, Under Capricorn (Kino); The Escape of Prisoner 614, I Can Only Imagine, Orange Is the New Black Season 5, Spinning Man, Tyler Perry's: Acrimony (Lionsgate); Double Lover (Momentum); Abominable, The Addiction, Body of Deceit, China Salesman, The Good Postman, I Called Him Morgan, I Dream in Another Language, Ice Mother, Inflammation, Lionheart, Motherland, Southwest of Salem The Story of the San Antonio Four, Tormentero, Vigil (MVD); Cold Turkey (Olive); Death Wish (Paramount); Mobile Suit Gundam Age, Mobile Suit Gundam Age Mystery of Eden OVA, Mobile Suit Gundam Age TV Series V.2, Mobile Suit Gundam 00 Special Edition; Love Simon (Fox); Gemini, Gringo, Midnight Sun, Pacific Rim Uprising, The Strangers Prey at Night, Thoroughbreds, Unsane (Universal); Black Lightning Season 1, Every Day, The Last Ship Season 4, The Lego Ninjago Movie, Tomb Raider, Will & Grace The Revival Season 1 (Warner)*

NEW IN 3D: The following titles have been released in 3D format—*The Lego Ninjago Movie, Tomb Raider (Warner)*

NEW IN 4K: The following titles have been released in 4K format—*A Wrinkle in Time (Buena Vista) Love Simon (Fox) Pacific Rim, Unsane (Universal) Tomb Raider (Warner)*

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Current Attractions

The following titles recently appeared for the first time:
 Abominable (MVD)
 The Addiction (MVD)
 Al Berto (TLA)
 Alex & Me (Warner)*
 Altered Perception (Cinedigm)
 Amerika Square (Film Movement)
 The Ancient Law (Flicker Alley)
 Antarctica (MHz)*
 Bad Lucky Goat (Film Movement)
 The Banishment (Kino)
 Beirut (Universal)
 Black Lightning Season 1 (Warner)
 Body of Deceit (MVD)
 Bowling for Columbine (Criterion)
 Broken (Warner)*
 Brotherly Love (Breaking Glass)
 The Cage Fighter (MPI)
 Call the Midwife Season 7 (Warner)*
 Caught (Cinedigm)
 China Salesman (MVD)
 Class Rank (Cinedigm)*
 Cold Feet The New Years Season 1 (Warner)*
 Cold Turkey (Olive)
 The Coroner Season 1 (Warner)*
 Death Wish (Paramount)
 Defining Hope (Kino)
 Detective Montalbano Episodes 31 & 32 (MHz)
 Disorganized Crime (Kino)
 Dogs of Democracy (MVD)
 Dolphins Spy in the Pod (Warner)*
 Dorothy and the Wizard of Oz: Emerald City Season 1 V.2 (Warner)
 Double Lover (eOne)
 Edward II (Film Movement)
 El Sur (Criterion)
 The Endless (Well Go)*
 The Escape of Prisoner 614 (Lionsgate)
 The Escape Plan 2 Hades (Lionsgate)*
 Every Day (Warner)
 Female Trouble (Criterion)
 Flower (Lionsgate)
 Followers (Cinedigm)
 Frank & Eva (CAV)
 Freak Show (Cinedigm)
 Funeral Day (Vimeo)*
 Gemini (Universal)
 Girlfriends (Acorn)
 Goddess of Love (MPI)*
 Going to War (Paramount)*
 The Good Postman (MVD)
 The Great Silence (Film Movement)
 The Great Summer Campout (Paramount)
 Grimsey (TLA)
 Gringo (Universal)
 Gross Anatomy (Kino)
 The Heart Guy Season 2 (Acorn)
 Hollywood on Trial (Film Movement)
 Hooked (Breaking Glass)
 Hurricane Bianca: From Russia with Hate (Wolfe)
 I Called Him Morgan (MVD)
 I Can Only Imagine (MPI)
 I Dream in Another Language (MVD)
 I, Jane Doe (Kino)
 Ice Mother (MVD)

In Syria (Film Movement)
 Inflamm (MVD)
 The Insult (eOne)
 Ismael's Ghosts (Magnolia)
 Jack the Giant Killer (Kino)
 Jacques Brel is Alive and Well and Living in Paris (Kino)
 Keep the Change (Kino)
 King of Hearts (eOne)
 La Belle Noiseuse (eOne)
 The Last Post Season 1 (Warner)*
 The Late Great Planet Earth (Kino)
 Lionheart (MVD)
 The Loud House It Gets Louder Season 1 V.2 (Paramount)
 Love, Simon (Fox)
 Lupin The 3rd Part IV The Italian Adventure (Discotek)*
 The Maids (Kino)
 Man in an Orange Suit (Paramount)
 Manila in the Claws of Light (Criterion)
 The Martian Chronicles (Kino)
 Menace & Murder (Acorn)
 Midnight Sun (Universal)
 Miracles (Kino)
 Miss Stevens (Allied Vaughn)*
 Mobile Suit Gundam Age (Right Stuf)
 Mobile Suit Gundam Age Memory of Eden OVA (Right Stuf)
 Mobile Suit Gundam Age TV Series V.2 (Right Stuf)
 Mobile Suit Gundam 00 Special Edition (Right Stuf)
 Motherland (MVD)
 Mr. Magnificent (CAV)*
 Mum Season 1 (Warner)*
 Naught Network (CAV)*
 NOVA Decoding Climate Change (Paramount)*
 NW (Warner)*
 Oh Lucy! (Film Movement)
 Orange Is the New Black Season 5 (Lionsgate)
 The Outsider (Icarus)
 Pacific Rim Uprising (Universal)
 Paradise (Film Movement)
 Peyton Place V.4 (Cinedigm)*
 The Pink Panther Cartoon Collection V.2 (Kino)
 Portlandia Season 8 (MVD)
 Power Season 4 (Lionsgate)
 Pressing On The Letterpress Film (Giant)
 The Return (Kino)
 Rose and Victor No Mercy (CAV)
 Scrum (MVD)
 Six Films by Nikolaus Geyrhalter (Icarus)
 South Park Season 21 (Paramount)
 Southwest Of Salem: The Story Of The San Antonio Four (MVD)
 Space Warrior Baldios (Discotek)*
 Spetters (Kino)
 Spinning Man (Lionsgate)
 The Strangers Prey at Night (Universal)
 Submission (Universal)
 Suits Season 7 (Universal)
 Sunny Day (Paramount)
 Sweet Blue Flowers (Right Stuf)
 Sylvia (CAV)
 Tehran Taboo (Kino)
 Terminal (Image)*

Thoroughbreds (Universal)
 Tomb Raider (Warner)
 Tormentero (MVD)
 Turtle Tale (Lionsgate)*
 Tyler Perry's: Acrimony (Lionsgate)
 Under Capricorn (Kino)
 Unsane (Universal)
 Vigil (MVD)
 The Virgin Spring (Criterion)
 Wastelander (Indican)
 Waterboys (Film Movement)
 West of the Jordan River (Kino)
 Where's Kyra? (Universal)
 Will & Grace The Revival Season 1 (Universal)
 The Woman in the Window (Kino)
 Wonderful World of Puppies and Kittens (Warner)*
 A Wrinkle in Time (Buena Vista)

Coming Attractions

The following select DVD titles are promised for the near future. How many of them will show up is never a certainty. Logical subdivisions appear unmarked within each division. Titles which did not appear on last month's list are marked with an arrow (→) and are added to the bottom of subdivisions so that the longest awaited titles appear at the top within each grouping:

From Acorn:
 Delicious Season 2
 Striking Out Season 2
 → Keeping Faith
 → Murdoch Mysteries Season 11

From Blues Music:
 → Sidemen Long Road to Glory

From Breaking Glass:
 Moss
 → Watch the Sky

From CAV:
 Female Prisoner 101
 Candy Lips
 Enter the Devil
 John From
 White Rose Campus
 Nun Story Frustration in Black
 Who Can Kill a Child?
 Spidarlings
 Zombie 3
 Zombie 4 After Death
 Shocking Dark

From Cinedigm:
 → The Good Place Season 2

From Criterion:
 A Matter of Life and Death
 sex, lies and videotape
 Dragon Inn
 Bull Durham
 Dietrich & von Sternberg in Hollywood (Shanghai Express, The Scarlet Empress, Morocco, Dishonored, Blonde Venus, The Devil Is a Woman)
 The Tree of Life (50 minutes longer)
 Memories of Underdevelopment
 The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez
 Heaven Can Wait
 Smithereens
 → Cold Water
 → Scenes from a Marriage
 → Andrei Rublev
 → My Man Godfrey
 → A Raisin in the Sun

From Film Movement:

Hamlet (Maxine Peak)
 Swung
 The Three-Way Wedding
 You Will Be Mine
 → Hotel Salvation
From First Run:
 → Razzia
From Flicker Alley:
 → The Man Who Cheated Himself
From Gravitas:
 1/1
 → Threesomething
From Green Apple:
 American Rap Stars 2
 How to Make a Major Independent Movie
 Napoleon Life of an Outlaw
 Brooklyn Knight
 Mahjongg
From Icarus:
 → The Chinese Lives of Uli Sigg
 → In Harmony
From IndiePix:
 → Blue Desert
 → Suffering of Ninko
From Kino:
 Perfect Obedience
 The Big Country
 → Personal Problems
 → Hitler's Hollywood
 → The Emma & Lachy Show
 → Modus Season 1
 → Invisible
 → The Jericho Mile
 → Prefontaine
 → The Adventures of Tom Sawyer
 → A Bill of Divorcement
 → Fire Birds
 → One Good Cop
 → Irma La Douce
 → Frank McKlusky, C.I.
 → The Associate
 → I Walk Alone
 → A Strange Adventure
 → Tiger by the Tail
 → Mr. Destiny
 → Taking Care of Business
From Lionsgate:
 → I Am Elizabeth Smart
 → Lean on Pete
 → Chappaquiddick
 → Future World
 → You Were Never Really Here
 → Counterpart Season 1
 → Dark Crimes
From Magnolia:
 Marrowbone
 Higher Power
 Dead Shack
 Don't Grow Up
 Found Footage 3D
 → Dust 2 Glory
From MHz:
 Spiral Season 6
From Mill Creek:
 → Masters of Sex The Complete Series
 → Happy Endings The Complete Series
From Milestone:
 → Rocco and His Brothers
 → Maborosi
From MPI:
 → Love after Love
 → A Ciambra
 → Wilding
From MVD Entertainment:
 Venus Obscura
 Caught in a Landslide
 → The Song of Solomon
 → Godmonster of Indian Flats
 → Hot Tub Party Massacre

→ True Love Ways
 → The Prince and the Nature Girl
 → Underbelly Beneath the World of Porn
 → Exploitation: A Woman's Descent into Hell
 → Girl Talk Confidential
 → Caught in a Landslide
From Olive:
 → Streets of Vengeance
From Paramount:
 Nella the Princess Knight: Royal Quests
 → PAW Patrol: Halloween Heroes
 Rusty Rivets
 → SpongeBob SquarePants: The Legend of Boo-Kini Bottom
From Passion:
 → Larger Than Life: The Kevin Aucoin Story
From Right Stuff:
 Mobile Suit Gundam 00: A Wakening of the Trailblazer
From Sony:
 → The Last Warrior
 → Sneaky Pete Season 1
 → Final Portrait
From Time-Life:
 → Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In Season 5
From Fox:
 → Super Troopers 2
 → Isle of Dogs
From Universal:
 The Magicians Season 3
 Disobedience
 Truth or Dare
 → The Expanse Season 3
 → I Feel Pretty
 → Tully
 → Revenge
 → Breaking In
From Warner:
 Arrow Season 6
 → The Big Bang Theory Season 11
 Blindspot Season 3
 → C.B. Strike The Series
 DC Legends of Tomorrow Season 3
 The Death of Superman
 The Flash Season 4
 → Freedom Fighters The Ray
 Gotham Season 4
 → In the Dark
 → Last of the Summer Wine 2008
 → The Last Post Season 1
 LEGO DC Comics Super Heroes: Aquaman – Rage of Atlantis
 → Life of the Party
 The Looming Tower
 Lucifer Season 3
 Mosaic The Mini-Series
 → Mystery of the Jurassic
 → The Originals Season 5
 → Rampage
 → Ready Players One
 Riverdale Season 2
 → Scooby-Doo! And the Gourmet Ghost
 Supergirl Season 3
 Supernatural Season 13
 → Unikitty: Sparkle Party Season 1 V.1
From Wavefront:
 The Valley
From Wild Eye:
 All Strippers Must Die
 Antarctica (MHz)*

*Did not appear on last month's Coming Attractions listing