

Decades of diabolical deeds

In 1922, Fritz Lang adapted a crime novel by Norbert Jacques as a two-part film, **Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler** (*Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler*). Continuing his pioneering efforts in cinema, Lang had been experimenting with longer and longer narratives. Each part of the film (Lang would refer to the feature in interviews as two separate movies) is itself broken into a half-dozen or so 'acts,' and what the movie actually resembles is what is known today as the 'limited series' (the act demarcations are the ideal points to take a viewing break). Released on a two-platter Blu-ray by F.W. Murnau Murnau Stiftung and Kino Lorber as a *Kino Classics* title (UPC#738329206307, \$40), *Part One: The Great Gambler (Zweiter Teil: Der große Spieler)* runs 155 minutes and appears on the first platter, while *Part Two: Inferno (Zweiter Teil: Inferno)* runs 115 minutes and appears on the second platter. Rudolf Klein-Rogge plays the villainous title character, who utilizes an advanced and somewhat fanciful form of hypnosis to short the stock market, manipulate card games at casinos, run a counterfeiting operation, assassinate people who oppose him and frustrate anyone who tries to come looking for him. Aud Egede Nissen and Gertrude Walker are, sequentially, the delectable objects of his desire, and Bernhard Goetzke is the steadfast detective ('Staatsanwalt,' which is translated in the subtitles as 'prosecutor'), who determines that there is a mastermind causing all this mayhem, but takes up most of both parts just trying to figure out who that man is.

In some ways, naturally, the film is fairly primitive, although one must realize that every subsequent crime film ever made owes something to its precedence. Klein-Rogge's character, while employing a steady stream of devious disguises to hide his true presence from all but a handful of servants/goons (and the two women) is just as dense as the police when it comes to following up on leads or anticipating obvious strategies, but the police are always just a little denser, until the very end. The film is also not the most fabulously designed movie Lang ever created. It spends a lot of time in lovely but confined beaux arts drawing rooms where characters talk about what they intend to do next (the intertitles are often screen-sized paragraphs), although there are, scattered throughout the entire production, some moments of grand German Expressionism, including angular stairwells and enormous puppets (the latter during a feverish dream sequence). The casinos and nightclubs are somewhat fancier (and, at one point, feature a topless dancer). Still, the film can be daunting to those not already transfixed by the mesmerizing appeal of silent features or by Lang's fully deserved pantheon status, but given half a chance, the thrill of the villain's manipulations and the suspense of the hero's close calls can be entirely captivating. Despite their occasional stupidities—the characters, after all, haven't spent lifetimes watching other crime movies to know what to do and what not to do—they think, act and feel like adults, and Lang's treatment of them as such is gratifying.

That enjoyment is aided significantly by the crisp stereophonic musical score, which is a total delight and contributes directly to raising the entertainment level of the film. There is a piano, strings, drums and a marvelous xylophone on the far left that keeps you on your toes. Aljoscha Zimmermann's scoring for every moment in the film is perfect, and its accentuation of every character movement and atmospheric shift increases an awareness of the film's dynamics and an appreciation of the conflicts among the characters.

The squared full screen black-and-white picture has some aging, of course, but is in very good condition. The image is often quite sharp, with distinctive contrast details, and wear is minimal. The intertitles are in German and are supported by optional English subtitles that remain legible even as they are superimposed upon the white lettering in the original frames. Included on the second platter is an outstanding 13-minute talk by Zimmermann explaining how the music is interpreting and deconstructing different passages of the film; a 10-minute profile of Jacques; and a very good 30-minute analysis of the film in the context of both cinema and social concerns of its day. "The Mabuse story is a conspiracy theory condensed into a film. Lang presented his hero consistently as an artistic character, so that his various masks and names do not suggest one single identity, do not brand him as a scapegoat that could explain all evil, but rather that they function as an allegorical presence of absolute evil that takes a variety of forms and shapes."

Just a decade later, in 1933, Lang followed up the film with a brilliant, direct sound sequel, **The Testament of Dr. Mabuse** (*Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse*), which has been released as a two-platter DVD set by The Criterion Collection (UPC#037429187227, \$40). Although dialog at one point pretty much summarizes the climax of **Dr. Mabuse, Gambler**, and the movie can be watched without any additional knowledge of the previous film, it is far more resonant and impactful if you watch them together. Klein-Rogge returns as Mabuse, along with Otto Wernicke (reprising his police inspector role from **M!**), Oscar Beregi, Wera Liessem, and Gustav Diessl.

The film's outstanding opening sequence is played like a silent film, thus facilitating the transition to dialog in a subsequent scene. With the pounding of a printing press (making more counterfeit bills) in the next room, a man sneaks into a storeroom to spy on henchmen who have entered to get more paper for the printer. The wordless sequence is intense, exciting, and drenched in atmosphere, telling you as much that Lang has arrived as it does that Mabuse is back. In some ways it is shocking that both films were made by the same director, because if you never saw any other films by Lang, you wouldn't think they had been. The set is tight, the shots are precise, and there is not a wasted frame. Lang's command of film language is as compelling as Mabuse's hypnotic powers,

guiding the viewer from one story point to the next.

Unlike **Gambler**, there are no points in the 121-minute film to take a breather. It barrels forward with the police investigating the murders of witnesses while men are gathering to commit the next set of crimes. The action scenes are thrilling—particularly the manner in which a couple trapped in a room filling with water manage their escape—and the film mixes genuine mystery (how is Mabuse doing all of this?) with suspense, romance and, raising its value significantly as an important cinematic accomplishment, a very potent and deliberate political resonance. "Humanity's soul must be shaken to its very depths, frightened by unfathomable and seemingly senseless crimes. Crimes that benefit no one, whose only objective is to inspire fear and terror. Because the ultimate purpose of crime is to establish the endless empire of crime. A state of complete insecurity and anarchy, founded upon the tainted ideals of a world doomed to annihilation. When humanity, subjugated by the terror of crime, has been driven insane by fear and horror, and when chaos has become supreme law, then the time will come for the Empire of Crime." It was too much for the Nazis, who refused to allow the film to be shown in Germany, and it carries lessons that are still relevant and worth paying attention to.

The squared full screen black-and-white picture is very crisp and in good condition, with very little wear and no significant flaws. Again, there are references to German Expressionism in some of the production designs, although in this instance they are deliberate callbacks to a time when Mabuse operated more freely. The sound has its limitations but, as the opening scene demonstrates, it is intricately designed and still effective despite its age. The film is in German with optional English subtitles.

The film is accompanied by an excellent commentary track from Mabuse expert David Kalat, who deconstructs the feature scene by scene while also going over its innovations (the chase at night at the end was a first for outdoor shooting in low light), the biographies of the filmmakers, the film's eternal topicality (at the time of the DVD's release, he compares the Mabuse character to Osama bin Laden), its initial political context, and the meanings of the name, 'Mabuse,' which could also be interpreted as the infliction of self harm, as in what leaders sometimes do to their own countries to remain in power. "Each new generation finds in Mabuse the same underlying threat mapped onto the current world situation. It's little use in saying that 'Mabuse' is a single individual. Mabuse is a name for a system. The cost to society for something like Enron's collapse vastly outstrips what any single criminal can do, but our criminal justice system is built to deal with the bank robber, not the bank owner. As a society, we haven't yet worked out an effective judicial system for dealing with corporate crime. Like Mabuse, a corporation is a fictional entity, a name applied to a system. When a corporation commits a crime, who do you hold accountable?"

Like the Spanish **Dracula**, Lang shot a French language version of the film, *Le Testament du Dr. Mabuse*, concurrently with the German version, and a copy of that version, albeit with permanent Dutch subtitles covered up by permanent English subtitles, is presented on the second platter. Klein-Rogge, Bourdelle and costar Karl Meixner reprise their roles, with Jim Gérald, René Ferté, Thomy Bourdelle and Monique Rolland. Unlike **Dracula**, it has little to recommend. Running 94 minutes, a couple of very minor plot details are illuminated in a manner left undelineated in the German presentation, but none of the performances are significantly different or striking, and the film just feels like a sloppier production. Watching it in any proximity to the original actually undercuts the high you associate with the previous experience. The source material is also in substantially weaker condition.

Also featured on the platter is a 20-minute comparison by Kalat between the original version, the French version and the American version, *The Crimes of Dr. Mabuse*, which was included on the DVD release of the film's 1962 remake, also known as **The Testament of Dr. Mabuse**, which we reviewed in Sep 00. The American version was a dubbed and trimmed version of the German version. Kalat uses side-by-side shots to demonstrate how the films are similar and dissimilar, and the thematic alterations these changes create. He also offers interesting comparisons between the French and German performers. Included as well is a terrific collection of original production designs and memorabilia in still frame; a 21-minute (with exit music) interview with Lang from 1964 (also excerpted in the 30-minute piece on **Dr. Mabuse, Gambler** disc, and elsewhere) in which he talks about several of his early films, including the Mabuse movies, and then shares his apocryphal story about how he left Nazi Germany; a great 15-minute interview with costar Rudolf Schündler (it was his first film—he has a prominent role as one of the gangsters and is reminiscent of Klaus Kinski) from 1984, in which he talks about the shoot and the directions that Lang gave him; and the same 10-minute piece on Jacques that appeared in **Dr. Mabuse, Gambler**.

In 1960, Lang resurrected the seemingly immortal character once again, with **The 1,000 Eyes of Dr. Mabuse** (*Die 1000 Augen des Dr. Mabuse*). We reviewed the Allday Entertainment DVD in Sep 00. Once again, there is a deftly presented summary of what happened in the climax of **The Testament of Dr. Mabuse**, so that even though a couple of more decades have passed, the film is again a direct sequel to its predecessor. The incredibly charismatic Gert Fröbe plays the police inspector who must initially investigate a murder committed in a manner nearly identical to a murder committed in **Testament**—a plot point, incidentally—and while investigating the death finds that he himself has become targeted for assassination. While the film is not as immediately gripping as **Testament**, it is, in its own way, an engrossing and wholly appealing, fanciful

crime thriller. Much of it is set in a hotel originally built by the Nazis and rigged for surveillance and blackmail. There are a few violent sequences to keep things hopping, but most of the film is confined to rooms and conversations, as Fröbe's character investigates several figures at the hotel—a woman who attempted suicide but was saved by an American industrialist, an insurance agent busily peddling policies at what is known to be an 'unlucky' hotel, and a blind clairvoyant. It is the constant story twists and intriguing, nicely played characters (there are a number of supporting characters as well, from the hotel detective to the woman's doctor), and those punctuations of violence that make the 104-minute feature continually and unwaveringly entertaining. There is also a frantic car chase at the end, and while it is not as spectacularly staged as the finale to **Testament**, it is more satisfying in the way that it integrates its excitements with the consistencies of the film's tone, a work of sheer entertainment perfection.

The relative success of **1000 Eyes** spawned a rash of German Mabuse movies in the early Sixties, and Radiance Films has gathered five of them along with **1000 Eyes**, all of which were produced by the German film company, CCC Films, in a fantastic four-platter *Masters of Cinema* Blu-ray boxed set, **Mabuse Lives! Dr Mabuse at CCC: 1960-1964** (UPC#760137174240, \$95). **Dr. No** did not rise out of the sea like Botticelli's *Venus*. The trend towards spy films pitting a hero against a mastermind villain had been accumulating in the late Fifties and early Sixties in Europe, and none more so than these Mabuse films, which not only anticipate the Bond movies, but subsequently compete with them.

The box set contains two jackets along with a nice booklet, and each jacket holds two platters. The first four black-and-white films have an aspect ratio of about 1.66:1 and the final two are in a squared full screen format. All are in German with optional English subtitles, but all have a secondary English track as well, which is good enough if you want to share the movies with sophisticated youngsters, who will get a real kick out of them, we guarantee. On occasion, British stars in the films are dubbed in German and use their own voices on the English tracks. On all of the movies, the monophonic sound is reasonably strong and sharp. The scores are by different composers, but they all have a pleasing early Sixties jazz sound. Every film is accompanied by an outstanding and thorough commentary track from Kalat.

Appearing by itself on the first platter, **1000 Eyes** costars Peter van Eyck, Wolfgang Preiss and Dawn Addams. The picture on Allday's DVD looked terrific, but the Blu-ray looks much, much better. We spotted one errant vertical line, but otherwise the image is sharp and spotless. One shot of a couple at a nightclub looks weak and blurry, but then the camera pulls back and you realize that it is a TV screen that an unseen figure is watching, eavesdropping on them, and when the film cuts to a different angle, the couple are in sharp focus and the image is clear again. It is a very cute effect that anticipates, among other things, the dynamics of preserving films for home video pleasures.

There is an excellent 12-minute introduction by Tim Lucas (he provides one for each film), who describes the efforts after the war to transition German cinema away from the propaganda mindset and back to pure entertainment, as well as sharing other pertinent insights about the films and Lang's early **Mabuse** movies. He also provides quick sketches of the cast and the crew. All of the Lucas introductions are accompanied by montages of promotional materials. Also featured is an American trailer (where the film was called *Eye of Evil*), a minute-long alternate ending that kills off a character who remains alive in the standard conclusion (the ending that Kalat mistakenly used when producing Allday's DVD), and a lovely 15-minute interview with Preiss shot in 2002 shortly before he passed away, talking about Lang, van Eyck (who didn't get along with Lang) and his experiences as one of Hollywood's go-to German villains.

Kalat provided a commentary on the DVD, but he has recorded a brand new one for the BD, going into more specific detail about the film's creation, Lang, the German film market and the early days of CCC while knowing that he will have time in the later commentaries to explore the story's antecedents, recurring cast and crew members, and other matters. He also explains that since in all of the movies, the cast members recorded their dialog later on, the English dubs of the films are as valid as the German audio tracks. He discusses the film's complex narrative, remarking upon its many tricks and its references to other works, and the odd coincidence of three classic films in which voyeurism is intrinsic with criminality appearing in 1960, the other two being **Psycho** and **Peeping Tom**. Should 1959's **The Immoral Mr. Teas** be added to the list?

The only person in the film that you trust implicitly, Fröbe is back in the 1961 *The Return of Dr. Mabuse (Im Stahlnetz des Dr. Mabuse)*, which opens the second platter, directed by Harald Reinl. Lex Barker and Daliah Lavi costar, with Werner Peters, Fausto Tozzi and, briefly, Preiss. The film sustains the basic style and tone of **1000 Eyes**. While there are less specific references to the earlier films, there is a general acknowledgement of them, and a number of rhyming incidents—Barker and Bevi end up getting trapped in another room filling with water, although their escape is lame compared to the escape in **Testament of Dr. Mabuse**. The villain is using convicts from a prison to carry out his deeds and trying to work a deal with the American mafia, represented by Barker's character, to market a world domination hypnotic drug. Running 89 minutes, the scenes with Barker and Lavi are fun, but the film belongs to Fröbe, who tirelessly tracks down clues to the various murders that are occurring and gradually pieces everything together. The film is not as crisply conceived or executed as **1000 Eyes**, but it is a close enough copy—Reinl does use a number of shots that were conceived by Lang in the previous film—that there is no

jarring shift going from the first movie to the second. It is all one wonderful, suspenseful romp.

The picture is in excellent condition, and there are trailers for both the German and American releases, the latter known as *The Phantom Fiend*. The Lucas introduction runs 9 minutes.

Kalat's commentary dives extensively into the history of Edgar Wallace, whose works supplied a second template for the film, and he also provides a thorough background on the series and how the film came to be made. He points out the proliferation of 'blind assassins' in the movies, but fails to make that connection to the later **Dr. No**. He dissects the movie's plot, cheering its excitements even as he points out its contradictions of logic. He goes over the biographies of the cast and crew members and explains why their contributions are appropriate to the film, and how they fit into series. "For anyone who has been watching these **Dr. Mabuse** films in short succession, you will quickly recognize the awesomely prolific Werner Peters there, on the right side of the screen. Here we see him in the second of four completely distinct characters he plays in the series, two good guys and two bad guys."

Probably the most enjoyable movie in a box full of enjoyable movies, the 1962 *The Invisible Dr. Mabuse (Die unsichtbaren Krallen des Dr. Mabuse)* is tremendous fun. It opens at a theater where an operetta is being performed, and in one box, a champagne glass is floating in the dark, all by itself. Whoa! Barker takes over as the star—Fröbe's character is never mentioned—playing (whoops, necessary spoiler) the American agent from the last film, who is aiding the German government in locating a scientist who was developing an invisibility suit (although it is sci-fi, there is a genuinely decent attempt to explain how the suit works). Running 89 minutes, the film has an excellent pace, terrific fight scenes, nice bits of violence that America wasn't allowing at the time, a touch of **The Phantom of the Opera**, an early evil clown, a grand climactic battle at an airport with a platoon of invisible men (we won't spoil how the heroes get the upper hand, but it's a good plan to keep in mind if that sort of thing ever does occur) and a lingering crazy Nazi political undercurrent. If you work backwards from the end, the story doesn't actually make much sense so far character logic goes, but none of that matters when you are in the thrall of the film's unfolding. It is everything you want in a serious but lighthearted crime thriller. Future Bond girl Karin Dor costars, with Preiss, Peters, Siegfried Lowitz and Rudolf Fernau.

One of the reel change marks has been left in and there are a couple of other scattered scratches, but the picture is mostly in great condition. The introduction by Lucas runs 6 minutes, and there are another two trailers (the American version promoted as *The Invisible Horror*).

Kalat's commentary again delves into the legacy of Wallace's stories and the financial dynamics of the German film industry after the war (and subsequently during the walling of Berlin). He also goes over the backgrounds of the cast members he did not cover in the previous talks, and weaves a dazzling conceptual analysis of the film, its antecedents, and movie trends that would manifest later when special effects became more sophisticated. "When modern viewers watch the 1933 **Invisible Man** and say, 'Those effects aren't completely convincing, but I'm enjoying watching how they did it,' that's exactly what audiences in 1933 felt, too. It was never fully convincing. That was never an achievable goal. The point was to get something on film that audiences enjoyed looking at and that would generate at least a little whiff of marvel. And I submit that that's the point [of] all these low budget invisible man movies scattered across 1940s and Fifties and Sixties, including this one."

Also featured on the platter is a nice 16-minute interview with the daughter of CCC co-founder Artur Brauner, Alice Brauner, talking about her father's background, her own upbringing, his exceptional career in film production, and how she herself has taken up his reins (and is promising more Mabuse movies, very soon!).

The 1962 **Testament of Dr. Mabuse (Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse)** is a clever and highly enjoyable remake of the 1933 film. It does not copy the plot precisely, but it does copy a number of sequences exactly, and the general essence of the film is the same. The Mabuse character is once again locked in an insane asylum, but is somehow making plans that are being carried out by a busy gang of rogues. Running 89 minutes, the film opens with two very clever robberies—even more than smoked fish, the Sixties loved their capers—and then Fröbe returns as if he had been the arresting officer in **Invisible**. This time, however, there is no hesitation in his character knowing who is responsible for the crimes, it is just a matter of proving it to everyone else. Senta Berger and Helmut Schmid costar, with Preiss, Charles Regnier and Leon Askin. Directed by Werner Klingler, the film has none of the political reverberations that made its namesake so compelling, and there are inevitably moments where the logic breaks down, but it is another enormously enjoyable and satisfying fling.

Once again, the BD is a substantial improvement over Allday's DVD. The picture has some minor wear in a couple of spots, but generally looks as glossy and sharp as the previous features. The Lucas introduction runs 8 minutes and focuses on the film's creators. There are two trailers.

Kalat again provides a different commentary than the one he did for the DVD. Along with talking about the new players and Klingler, and adding fresh perspectives to his profiles of the returning players, he goes over the plot and its relationship to 'heist' films and caper movies. He compares all of the different versions and variations of the film and points out that sometimes this movie couldn't use classic sequences from the original **Testament** because they had already been used in one of the three previous films in the series. He provides a detailed provenance justifying his own expertise in the series as a

whole, and he discusses the appeal of the films. “The Mabuse series is not about character. These films do not involve a recurring set of characters that audiences returned time and again to watch, as with almost any other movie series. Instead, these films offer a recurring set of narrative themes, a constant struggle between the pervasive corruption of evil and the ineffective forces of law and order. The hook that keeps the series going is that each film ends with an incomplete, insufficient resolution about underlying conflict. Mabuse may be held at bay, but he is never defeated. Good wins the battles, but evil wins the war. The essence of police work is to seek out whodunit. If identity is [a] mutable, inconstant quality, then this job loses all its meaning. The question is, ‘Who has committed these crimes?’ and the answer is, ‘Dr. Mabuse.’ To the question, ‘Who is Dr. Mabuse?’ the answer is, ‘The person who committed these crimes.’ It’s a serpent biting its own tail. A Möbius strip of identity.”

Van Eyck returns as the hero in the 1963 *Scotland Yard Hunts Dr. Mabuse* (*Scotland Yard jagt Dr. Mabuse*), but in a different role than the one he had in **1000 Eyes**, playing a British law officer who is called to Hamburg when an associate is involved in the murder of a scientist. The police soon get wind that the villains have also gone to England and so the German cop, played by Peters, accompanies Van Eyck’s character back. Kinski plays one of Van Eyck’s underlings, and Sabine Bethmann, Dieter Borsche and Preiss costar. Based upon a story by Wallace and directed by Paul May, the 90-minute film does acknowledge the previous movie but quickly settles into a narrative that would not be out of place in an episode of **The Avengers**. The murdered scientist had developed a device that can be made to look like a Super-8 camera, but actually hypnotizes the person it is pointed at, and opens that person to transmitted orders that are automatically obeyed, even if it calls for suicide. Mabuse attempts to use the device to take over England. The film remains fully enjoyable, and whenever there is a breach of logic, it doesn’t really matter because the plot moves quickly onto something else. The action scenes are generally a little blander than they were in the previous movies—three is less gore, as well—but even though it’s not the best movie in the set, it still has all of the intrigue and witty presumptions that make the set as a whole so enjoyable.

The picture is a little grainier than the others, but still looks decent, and the sound remains strong. The Lucas introduction runs 9 minutes and provides a succinct summary of the story’s initial turns, as well as talking about the backgrounds of some of the filmmakers. Kalat’s commentary is again both engaging and informative, as he steps back to present the context in which the film was created before delving into the complexities and simplicities of the narrative. He suggests that locations for the films moved out of Germany to avoid Nazi allusions, talks about the film’s specific challenges (“Mind control is not an inherently cinematic idea, making its visuals tricky.”), takes issue with the sexist attitudes of the characters and suggests that the vacuity of the female heroine is a core flaw of the film, which he still readily enjoys. He also shares the fascinating story of how the filmmakers hustled like mad when the 1963 Great Train Robbery occurred during the final week of filming, and managed to incorporate a fairly accurate re-enactment of it as part of the film. He urges folks who enjoy the delightful **Mabuse** films to share the movies with their friends, in order to get the word out and affix them a proper niche in the world entertainment canon. The only thing we would amend to that idea is that one stretch out the space between watching one or two of them and moving on to the next, so that the similarities between the films do not outweigh the delight of discovery.

The platter also features an interesting 30-minute rumination upon both Lang and the other **Mabuse** films, with lots of great clips from additional films, including Lang’s Hollywood features and even **Scream and Scream Again** (Jun 97), which the German dub turned into a Mabuse movie.

Two versions of the final film, *The Death Ray of Dr. Mabuse*, are presented on the final platter, the standard German version, *Die Todesstrahlen des Dr. Mabuse*, which runs 91 minutes, and an Italian version, *I Raggi Mortali del Dr. Mabuse*, which runs 109 minutes. The German version is mostly incoherent and the weakest movie in the set. To its credit, it was made in 1964 (before **Thunderball** had even been chosen as the next Bond movie) and ends with an elaborate underwater frogman battle, thus earning respect as a vanguard work and not a copycat bandwagon production, although the music at the conclusion of the fight is just two notes away from the James Bond theme. No one ever steps foot in Germany. Most of the film is set in Malta, where a good scientist has developed as ray gun that can bounce its flash off the moon and destroy any city on Earth. Van Eyck’s character (although again he has a different character name) is sent to protect him and kind of steps into a whole web of disguised good agents and bad guys, kind of bouncing back and forth as he attempts to determine what is going on and who is who. Again, the film, directed by Hugo Fregonese, is technically a direct sequel to the previous movie, but the girlfriend that Van Eyck’s character was so lovey-dovey with at the end of that film is suddenly non-existent, and he takes a different girl to Malta with him, promptly ignoring her once he gets there. For her safety, she has to stay in a bordello. Go figure. The basic atmosphere of intrigue, occasional fights and exotic situations is enough to sustain the film’s entertainment, but it is pretty much a mess.

The Italian version adds more to the beginnings and endings of scenes and makes the film easier to follow. It is still nonsensical, but the nonsense is more coherent. There is also an additional epilog that closes out a character rather nicely who otherwise just disappears after a point in the German version. Yvonne Furneaux, O.E. Hasse, Leo Genn, Rika Dialina, Walter Rilla, Ernst

Schroder and Yoko Tani (who calls to mind a similar character in **Dr. No**) costar. Preiss is listed in the credits, but never actually appears in the film. We hope he got his residuals.

The picture is in adequate condition and usually looks nice, with minimal grain. The footage from the German presentation is preserved in the Italian version, so it is fairly easy to spot the new footage, which is often not as smooth or as solid. The Lucas introduction runs 14 minutes, summarizing Fregonese’s career, discussing the stars and broaching the film’s convoluted narrative. Even he recommends watching the Italian version first.

Kalat’s commentary, conversely, is his best work in the set, even though every talk is excellent. He spends the majority of the time speaking about the James Bond series and the links in inspiration to Dr. Mabuse, but even he is baffled by the film’s parallel development of the underwater battle, since the chronology does not even allow for the sort of anticipatory quickie that still happens today on made-for-video/streaming releases that mimic forthcoming blockbusters. More importantly, however, is his interest in the structure of Bond films and how that structure is followed nearly to the letter in *Death Ray*, even though the movie and the series have an entirely different thematic underpinning. He also goes on fascinating digressions about everything from Claude Chabrol to Bruce Lee, and still manages to talk about the careers and accomplishments of the series newcomers, and embellish the portfolios of those he has talked about previously. And he has a great time deconstructing the awkwardly designed film, as best he can.

“I love Dr. Mabuse. I love this film. But let’s be honest. It has a great soundtrack, a great cast, lovely location shooting. It even has sharks! But it is an idiotic, nonsensical plot. This is a mess of a movie. God, it’s fun. I love it. I’ve spent more time in its company than I’ve spent in the company of several of my relatives, but come on, man, I can’t pretend this is a good movie. It is an assembly of miss-matched bits and pieces from other places. It’s got a bundle of things that are here only because that’s what happens in German ‘Krimi’ films, and it’s got a bundle of things that are here only because that’s what happens in Euro spy films. But none of those things are here because any responsible decision maker sat down and said, ‘We should do these things like this, because here’s an idea I want to get across.’ By contrast, I champion the 1961 *Return of Dr. Mabuse* and the 1962 **Testament of Dr. Mabuse** as examples of brilliantly executed motion picture thrillers, where every element has been thought through and put forward in service of getting across a coherent idea while, at the same time, being decidedly formulaic. So being commercial, being formulaic, being part of a franchise—those are not antithetical to being a quality film, but it takes a production team that’s working together to bring their best self.”

Recherché Dracula

In a spate of less than 2 years, Universal Studios Home Entertainment has released three wonderful *recherché* Dracula films on DVD. Each one is an utter delight—provided the viewer takes delight in abject terror and unrestrained gore—while approaching its topic from very fresh and creative perspectives.

First up is the 2023 Chris McKay feature, **Renfield** (UPC#19132924-6382, \$17), which is a comedy of sorts, with blood and gore spilling in such outrageous abundance, every shredded limb becomes another gleeful point of humor. Nicholas Hoult, channeling the young Hugh Grant, stars as the vampire’s demeaned assistant, suffering from low self-esteem and a lack of self worth, although when he eats bugs he gains superpowers. Set in modern day New Orleans, he begins attending a group therapy for people caught in abusive relationships, and his eyes start to open to another way of living. Aquafina plays a cop investigating murders that eventually lead to Hoult’s character, who nevertheless saves her life during a mob shootout. Dracula is a secondary character, so even though Nicolas Cage is playing him, he does not dominate the film or become an overly irritating presence. Instead, his appearances become marvelous punctuation moments to already exaggerated and fanciful situations. Running 93 minutes, the film is consistently amusing and constantly invigorating as it toggles between wild, bloody action sequences and witty reconsiderations of the Dracula aesthetic.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. Darker sequences are a little soft, but when the blinds open, everything is bright, clear and sharp. The 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound has a workable surround presence and a little bit of punch at the right moments. There is an audio track that describes the action (“Dracula snarls and holds out his arms. His hands bear long, pointed fingernails. Levitating, he looms over the support group members. Renfield kneels and Mark follows suit.”), alternate French and Spanish audio tracks, optional English, French, Spanish, Chinese and Korean subtitles, 39 minutes of excellent production featurettes and 21 minutes of terrific deleted and alternate scenes featuring way more and maybe inappropriate gore, along with wonderful ad libs by Aquafina and a couple of other cast members, and a complete and captivating dance number performed by Hoult (who knew he had it in him?).

Producer Samantha Nisenboim and a half dozen crewmembers supply an enthusiastic commentary track, recalling the details of the shoot (one day there was a tornado while they were working), admiring the energy and creativity of the performers and going over the strategies they had for setting the film apart from other such movies (among other things, they gave Cage a lot of extra teeth). It is a fully informative and entertaining talk, and the end, they have a special plea. “Guys, if you want a sequel to **Renfield**, start emailing this guy, [Universal President] Peter Cramer, and let him know, and we will show up and get you

another movie, no questions asked.”

Absolutely nothing unexpected occurs in the 2023 **The Last Voyage of the Demeter** (UPC#191329252925, \$20), but the film’s attractions lie in the basic nature of its adventure and horror, even though you know what is going on. Even the initial viewing feels like a repeat viewing, but as a coaxial, subsequent viewings lose very little of their appeal, because it is the period, seafaring setting and the ominous atmosphere, punctuated here and there with gore, that is the primary manner of its entertainment. Running a full 118 minutes, the film is simply about the ill-fated sailing ship that is transporting Dracula’s crates from Romania to London as, one-by-one, the crewmembers meet bloody nocturnal demises in the hands of a very hungry but otherwise elusive passenger. The performances are mostly part of the atmosphere and are quite enjoyable in that regard. Corey Hawkins stars as a doctor who has been unable to secure a position as a surgeon because of his African heritage, and signs on with the crew after wiser sailors opt to stay ashore. If the film intends some sort of metaphor regarding racial isolation and exploitation, it is confused at best, but as the least integral component of the original Bram Stoker story, he provides the tentpole upon which the rest of the tale can effectively hang its thrills.

Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback, the picture looks really good, even during the many darker sequences. Contrasts are well defined and softness is kept to a minimum. The special effects work especially well because the dark murkiness of the ship’s interiors disguise their artifice. The 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound has many enjoyable separation effects, as do so many films set upon creaky sailing ships, augmented by some pretty good thumps when such moments arise. There is an audio track that describes the action (“As he struggles to light a match in the pouring rain, a lightning flash reveals Dracula standing behind him.”), alternate French and Spanish audio tracks, optional English, French and Spanish subtitles, 14 minutes of deleted and alternate scenes that would have dragged things out a bit, and 26 minutes of excellent production featurettes that focus a lot on the show’s special effects.

Director André Øvredal and producer Bradley Fischer supply a reasonably thorough commentary track (they also speak over the deleted and alternate scenes), discussing the film’s conception—they smartly used **Alien** as a model for the drama—along with the performances, the staging and the effects, which speak to both the film’s strengths and its limitations. “These fire effects are all CG and it’s kind of amazing that it’s possible to make practical clothing and everything look like it’s actually burning just with CG elements.”

It is immensely gratifying that Robert Eggers’s outstanding 2024 revitalization of **Nosferatu Extended Cut** (UPC#191329273197, \$23) was not only a financial success, but a critical one as well, earning numerous awards, including four Oscar nominations (they were never going to give the movie a statue, but considering the graphic nature of its genre components, that alone is to be cheered). The film is a celebration of Nineteenth Century literature and art. Set in Germany in the 1830s, Houlst (who has exhausted his allotted castings as Dracula’s lackey, but no matter, because he does do it well) is the hapless real estate agent sent across the mountains to finalize the purchase of a decaying castle in the city. Hidden beneath makeup but not to the point of monstrosity, at least at first, Bill Skarsgård is the buyer. Lily-Rose Depp, whose character has been having rather elaborate dreams since she was a young girl, is the wife Houlst’s character leaves at home to gain his commission.

The first half of the film is far less colorful but nevertheless reminiscent of Francis Coppola’s **Bram Stoker’s Dracula**. Its blends of greys and browns are still highly compelling. Steeped in the manners, perceptions and weathered décor of its era, the film is stupendously atmospheric while the narrative is, initially, ponderous. Even fans will feel the languish in its momentum while Houlst’s character, confined to the count’s dwelling, has feverish visions while patiently awaiting the conclusion of his transaction. There are periodic bursts of intrigue, however, and that is enough to keep one attentive, an attention that pays off wonderfully in the film’s second half (after, yes, a brief sequence similar enough to **The Last Voyage of the Demeter** to evoke a sense of rhyme), when the actions return to the town in Germany and Willem Dafoe is introduced as the ostracized professor who suspects that the town’s sudden outbreak of plague has a demonic source. Perhaps because of the film’s previous pacing or just simply because of Dafoe’s command of thespian skills, the film receives a deliberate transfusion of fresh life, and pumps a steady pulse of hematic thrills through to its end.

The disc contains both the 132-minute theatrical version and a longer 136-minute **Extended Cut** that stretches out atmospheric touches on a number of sequences but adds nothing directly to the narrative. The picture has an aspect ratio of about 1.66:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. There is a slight softness throughout, and a few darker sequences seem a bit murky in the corners, but overall the image remains captivating for its evocation of lost times, particularly during the sparingly presented shots that are well lit. The 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound has a terrific surround mix and a decent amount of power. There is an audio track that describes the action (“At night, Thomas walks down a dark forest road. Light snow falls, and pale moonlight shines from above. The forest around him remains mostly in darkness. Approaching a crossroads, he slows his pace. He comes to a stop where the two roads meet. He takes the saddlebags off his shoulders. He stares ahead. Through the fog, a dark outline emerges. On the road ahead, a carriage approaches, pulled by four larger horses.”), alternate French and Spanish audio tracks, optional English, French and Spanish subtitles, and 6 minutes of additionally atmospheric deleted scenes.

Eggers states at the end of his commentary, which is present on both versions (he makes note of where some of the added footage has been inserted) that he taught himself filmmaking by listening to other commentary tracks and wants to pass along what he has learned from his experiences. He talks a lot about his choices, in adapting scenes from the novel and previous cinematic versions of the story, in working with the actors and in being obsessively attentive to the film’s accents, designs, decorations and other aspects of its setting. “It would be more normal for Friedrich to have a tiled stove, but there is a lot of people in Northern Germany who are into British culture, and so having a fireplace like this would have been a sign of status and good taste, but not particularly common. Something you don’t see, which we actually have in like all the scenes in this house, is that wealthy people had little cushions in front of their chairs to put their feet on. You can just see them occasionally. It’s a pretty weird affectation and trend in the period.”

Pre-Code Crawford and post-Code Crawford

A superbly directed pre-Code 1934 MGM romance featuring Joan Crawford in the title role, **Sadie McKee**, has been released by Warner Bros. as a **Warner WB Archive Collection** Blu-ray (UPC#840418323687, \$22). She begins as the daughter of a cook in an upstate New York mansion who runs off with her boyfriend to New York City, only to be abandoned when neither one can find a job. She then meets a wealthy alcoholic played by Edward Arnold and plays along with him, much to the consternation of the wealthy boy from upstate who is still pining for her, played by Franchot Tone, and the boyfriend, played by Gene Raymond, when he finally makes it back to town. It is Clarence Brown’s deft direction of each scene that consistently improves the quality of the 93-minute drama, sustaining an involvement with the characters and a real interest in what will happen next and next and next. He also guides Arnold to an excellent performance in what is ostensibly an impossible role in which his character is either drunk, drunker or passed out altogether. Somehow, Arnold doesn’t just hold onto your sympathy, he also allows you to feel pleased with Crawford’s character’s accommodation of him. As the object of everyone else’s attention, Crawford remains somewhat subdued much of the time, but again that appears to be Brown’s very careful portioning of her moods so that when her character does break down, you feel her loss.

Already looking like an old man, Leo G. Carroll has a distinctive supporting part, along with Esther Ralston and Jean Dixon. The film’s production designs are invigorating, especially a hospice care ward that looks so gorgeous with winter snow outside its huge windows that you want to live there. The squared full screen black-and-white picture is very sharp—when the gauze allows, you can see Crawford’s real eyelashes beneath the false ones—and free of wear. The monophonic sound is okay and be warned. Since Raymond’s character is a singer, the film has several song sequences, and you will likely be humming the MGM staple, *All I Do Is Dream of You*, for days afterward. There are optional English subtitles along with a trailer; a 7-minute 1934 black-and-white *Merrie Melodies* cartoon take on Rip Van Winkle dreaming he has been miniaturized, *Why Do I Dream Those Dreams*; a 6-minute 1934 black-and-white *Merrie Melodies* cartoon depicting animal performers and musicians putting on a concert and variety show in a barn, *Shake Your Powder Puff*; and a 7-minute 1934 two-tone color *Merrie Melodies* cartoon depicting anthropomorphic animals, birds and bugs frolicking in a springtime field and forest, *Pop Goes Your Heart*, which looks exceptionally gorgeous compared to the other Warner two-tone cartoons available on disc.

Not all screwball comedies were comedies. George Cukor’s adaptation of the Rachel Crothers stageplay, written for the screen by Anita Loos and sold in the trailer on the disc as a follow up to **The Women**, MGM’s 1940 **Susan and God**, a Warner **WB Archive Collection** DVD (UPC#883316242193, \$13), has the frantic veneer of a comedy, with characters played by Crawford and Fredric March trying to preserve their marriage while hangers on interfere and distract them with their own social agendas. But, with the exception of Marjorie Main, whose performance as an uppity housekeeper is exquisitely amusing, it was not intended to be funny. March’s character is a fairly serious alcoholic, his wife having driven him to drink with her flighty habits, and he only sobers up for the course of the film as they try during a summer to make one last go of it for the sake of their teenage daughter. Crawford, who comes across as a substitute for Rosalind Russell (Gertrude Lawrence had starred in a groundbreaking experimental television broadcast of the Broadway show a couple of years earlier), plays a character who appears to be caught in a crossroads between the Spiritualist movement of several decades before and the New Age movement of several decades later, although her declarations about the love of God—i.e., outside of the context of a church—are highly unusual for a film from that era.

It is widely understood that comedies from the Depression, to which this film was also a lingering relic, were set among the wealthy where, for escapist purposes, money troubles did not exist and the characters could, in essence, afford to have emotional quandaries about their relationships. That is the tableau the viewer is presented with in the film’s first act. Crawford’s character returns from some sort of retreat to a house filled with freeloading relatives and acquaintances—among them, Rita Hayworth in a reasonably large part, as well as Nigel Bruce, Bruce Cabot, Ruth Hussey, Gloria DeHaven and John Carroll—and their impulses leap randomly until March’s character shows up and they start focusing on making sure that he and Crawford’s characters do not see one another. The film’s midsection is about the summer spent with the daughter, played by Rita Quigley, and the efforts of March’s character to draw

out the suppressed maternal instincts of Crawford's character. This leads to an inevitable blow up and return to the bottle, which then sets up a reconciliation in the final act.

At first, the 117-minute film feels like a very big mistake, one that is not just awkward but embarrassing, and it certainly is not the movie in the forefront of the filmographies for anyone involved, but since it never really settles into a familiar format—it is more of a cut and paste of different formats—it becomes a viable curiosity, with valid performances and interesting situations. On the one hand, such films presented the rich to the middle class as having become confused and untethered by their abundance of resources. Thus, viewers could feel superior to the characters even though on a monetary scale, the characters are superior to them. On the other hand, however, it also presented the rich as harmless fools, to be more pitied than resented or despised, thus serving as an important release valve for the anger that was elsewhere setting the world on fire.

The full screen black-and-white picture is periodically sharp, with well defined contrasts, but there are also passages that are more noticeably worn. The monophonic sound is adequate.

More Bollywood Blu-rays from Leomark

Bollywood films range from old black-and-white romances to modern horror and action films, but when somebody says, "Bollywood," what comes to our mind first are the glorious widescreen melodramas filled with song and dance numbers, usually supported by the lovely vocals of studio singer Lata Mangeshkar. Thus, we were fully enthused and even enthralled by the Leomark Studios Blu-ray release of the 1972 Bollywood classic, **Pakeezah** (UPC#8404-18324417, \$20). The film is set during a time of locomotives and carriages, although during one shot early on, you can see an automobile racing past in the background. We need only describe the climax, however, which occurs during the last 10 minutes of the 154-minute feature (mistakenly listed on the jacket cover as running 187 minutes). The heroine, a courtesan who has been paid to dance at the wedding of the man she loves, knocks over a vase but continues to dance as her feet bleed on the floor, until she collapses. Having removed her veil, her father, the groom's uncle, recognizes the lost daughter he has been searching for over several decades. The grandfather, who has no idea what is going on, tries to shoot the heroine, but hits...well, we won't spoil everything. Getting there, however, is just as much fun as the destination. At one point the heroine is saved from a rich guy who wants to ravish her because they are on his boat and as it drifts down the river, elephants attack it, breaking it apart so that she continues to drift while it is he who is ravaged, and in a rather different way. She first fell in love with the groom even though she had never met him because he left a note between her toes while she was sleeping on a train, telling her how beautiful her feet were—yeah, foot fetishists are gonna love this movie—and although she carries the note wherever she goes, she doesn't finally meet him until much later, when that broken boat comes ashore next to his camping tent.

Directed by Kamal Amrohi, Meena Kumari stars, with Raaj Kumar, Ashok Kumar and an actress known as Nadira. Apparently the film itself went through a production process that lasted more than a decade, so that the heroine ages and de-ages in one scene after another. At one point, the heroine proclaims, "Is it all my dream, or have I gone mad?" and that is the core of the film's appeal, a dreamlike narrative that has an internal logic, but continually alters its locale and purposes in a transfixing state of emotional displacement.

Shot in Cinemascope and Technicolor, the widescreen images, letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1, are consistently rapturous. In an elaborate soundstage set of a brothel district, as the heroine dances for her customers, other women in other windows and on other balconies, far in the background, accompany the dance in unison. She earns enough money to purchase 'The Pink Palace,' and it is just as colorful as you would hope. Those with fuchsia fetishes should be lining up right behind the foot people. The color transfer is gorgeous and the image is sharp a good deal of the time. During dissolves, the quality of the picture drops precipitously, and focus seems to be a matter of chance, but on the whole, the presentation looks wonderful. The costumes, hair and makeup are exquisite, and the closer the camera gets to them, the more spectacular they appear. The sound is centered but is richly preserved. As we have mentioned before, many Bollywood tunes sound alike or almost alike, but the result is that you are already hooked on a number the moment it begins. That said, the songs that Kumar performs with Mangeshkar's vocals (several are also about feet and walking) are captivating and even definitive, as is, surprisingly, the fantastic background score by Naushad Ali, which serves as the true constant that holds the film together. The movie is in Hindi with permanent English subtitles, although fortunately, the subtitling often appears below the letterboxed image. There is no menu and no chapter encoding.

Do not be daunted by the 193-minute running time (mistakenly listed on the jacket as 185 minutes) for Leomark's terrific Blu-ray release, **Khuda Gawah** (UPC#840418324455, \$20). The film has a constant progression of frantic action scenes, great musical numbers, and brief but intense dramatic moments that rapidly advance the narrative. The opening 10 minutes is an entire action scene, followed by an 8-minute musical number, and the film's final 8 minutes is a musical number and an action scene combined, bringing a literal meaning to the phrase 'action choreography' with bombs and gunshots. Directed by Mukul S. Anand, the film was shot in Afghanistan and begins by depicting a competition that fans of John Frankenheimer's **The Horsemen** (Feb 04) will recognize, as men on horseback chase around an arid plain trying to grab the

carcass of a goat. It turns out, however, that one of those men is a woman! The film proceeds to its halfway point pretty much as if it were set in the Nineteenth Century, and there is really no more than a hint or two that it is not. In order to win the woman's love, the hero promises to bring back the corpse of her father's killer—in grand symbolism, he does so in the same way he was carrying the goat before she grabbed it from him—and in order to do that, he must spend time in jail after he drops off the corpse and marries her. More complications occur while his is in jail. Then, at the film's halfway point (also the perfect point to take an intermission—specifically at 1:41:55—if you want, though none is offered in the film), there suddenly appears what at first looks like a car commercial, but you quickly realize that indeed, the film has shifted from a mostly non-technological setting to a technological one, advancing over a decade in time and transitioning to the children of the previous characters, who must unravel the misguided commitments their parents have made to one another, and also defeat the evil drug traffickers.

The action scenes take every trick from the Yakima Canutt playbook and use them again and again—to be a stunt person on this film was to truly take your life in your hands, and the poor horses, forget about it. Amitabh Bachchan and an actress known as Sridevi (in dual roles!) star, with Danny Denzongpa, Vikram Gokhale and another actress called Nagarjuna. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and the color transfer is beautiful (for some reason, the eyes of the stars are often bloodshot, and the image is so sharp and well defined that such details are vividly clear). The cinematography isn't always perfectly focused, but when it is, the BD is not an impediment. The musical numbers are luscious; the desert and mountain vistas are fabulous; and bloodshot eyes aside, the stars are captivating. With apparent purpose, the monophonic sound often has an echoey ambience. This is used at times in other Bollywood features to underscore a dramatic moment, but here it is employed almost constantly, giving one a good idea of how many dramatic moments there are in the film. In any case, the monophonic sound is otherwise is decent condition. The film is mostly in Hindi and is supported by permanent English subtitles. There is no menu and no chapter encoding.

Some viewers react negatively to Bollywood films because the filmmaking can seem inept or even crude, but the really good movies wear down your resistance. Sohail Khan's 1999 **"Hello Brother"**, released on Blu-ray by Leomark (UPC#840418324752, \$20), opens with a very splashy and impressive dance and action sequence—reminiscent, in some ways, of **Once upon a Time in China**—as townspeople, split into teams, form human pyramids in competition to reach a jar hanging high in the air. The music is great and the production is impressive. A short while later, however, there are gags involving overabundant flatulence from a police commander, and elsewhere there are attempts at slapstick humor involving the plucking of nose hairs and the twisting of male nipples. The good, however, is well worth tolerating the bad and ugly. Running a relatively brisk 134 minutes (although not the 128 listed on the jacket), one of the highpoints of the romantic fantasy action comedy is the plot turn that establishes its actual premise, and while that plot turn is readily revealed in the jacket text, it is best left to be discovered, because the story takes you down one path and then, quite enjoyably, turns you onto another. Salman Khan plays a courier who is unknowingly moving drugs for a kingpin (Shakti Kapoor doing a nice Al Pacino thing) and Arbaaz Khan is a police inspector trying to bust the ring. Rani Mukerji is a schoolteacher that they are both in love with. Base slapstick gags aside, the action is tolerable, the love story is compelling, and the songs and dance numbers, from the heart of Bollywood's modern, home-video-and-cable Golden Era, are really, really good, so that if you can just make it to that one plot twist, the film becomes a fully satisfying and enjoyable entertainment. It could be much better, yes, but it delivers all the toe tapping, hand weaving fun you require to come away humming and with a smile.

Ostensibly set in Bombay, the film was actually shot in Mauritius (except for one number which was filmed for no particular reason beyond exoticism in The Netherlands), which brings a welcome shift in tone to the locations. Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1, the color transfer is excellent, with bright hues and accurate fleshtones. While the Dolby logo appears at the end of the credits, the sound is centered, although it is reasonably strong. The film is in Hindi with permanent English subtitles, and the disc has no menu or chapter encoding.

The generally irresistible Blu-ray from Leomark, **Hevy Babvy** (UPC#840418324400, \$20), is a 2007 production directed by Sajid Khan, lifted from the French comedy, **Three Men and a Cradle**, and its blockbuster Hollywood remake, **Three Men and a Baby**, both of which were basically a romcom version of **Three Godfathers**. It opens with an extremely sexy and flashy disco number that lets you know you aren't in the previous millennium, after which it shifts to its comedy—a baby is left at the doorstep of a fancy apartment shared by three bachelors in their twenties—with the slapstick and clowning being rather hard to take at first. The men toss baby powder on each other, and at one point, a loaded diaper goes flying around, hitting one of them straight on in the face. But the kid is adorable, and in the same way that the baby gradually grows upon the men's affections, so does the film endear itself to the viewer.

Since the movie runs a full 144 minutes (not the 138 listed on the jacket), there is a long (and sexy again) centerpiece flashback that shows how the father and mother first met at a wedding, and it is a terrific Bollywood romance sequence, with fantastic songs, gorgeous costumes, wonderful choreography and captivating melodrama. It is with this sequence and what follows that the film

stakes out its own territory, the men putting on disguises in hopes of preventing the woman from taking the baby back. There are a number comedy sequences toward the end that will work for any viewer, and the concluding romance is well played, regardless of how stretched out the film has the luxury of making it. While the dance numbers never exceed those of a decent American TV variety show, that doesn't stop them from the exhilaration they instill. Basically, the emotional core of the film continually lowers your defenses, and then the song and dance numbers make you soar.

Set in Sydney, Australia, Akshay Kumar, Fardeen Khan, Riteish Deshmukh and Vidya Balan star. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. Except for the occasional shortcoming in the original cinematography, the colors are slick and glossy, and the image is flawless. The stereo sound gives the music a pleasing and pulsating dimensionality. The film is in Hindi with permanent English subtitles, and the disc has no menu or chapter encoding.

An episodic action film that eventually settles into the story of a thief and the long lost daughter of a prison warden, battling a gangster, the 1981 **Kaalia** is another Leomark Blu-ray (UPC#840418324462, \$20). Running a full 172 minutes (again, listed incorrectly on the jacket as 165 minutes), Amitabh Bachchan stars as a layabout coward whose brother is killed in a factory accident. Taking revenge upon the factory owner, he is sent to prison, where he learns mad fighting skills (at least on a Bollywood level—while better than most, the filmmakers still haven't entirely mastered the art of selling a punch) and becomes a criminal upon his release, making enough money to see that his brother's family is safe and secure while swearing to avenge his brother's death. The factory owner is also a major gangster, and the two face off attempting various heists, in which Bachchan's character invariably gets the upper hand. The show's running time works very much to its favor. Directed by Tinnu Anand, each action sequence, dramatic sequence and song not only advances the plot, but reinvigorates the film, so that by the third act the viewer is awash in the pleasures of motion picture entertainment and wishes for it to go on as long as it is necessary. The highpoint during that last act puts one over on **Jailhouse Rock**, as the inmates in a prison, led by a convict with one leg, perform a song and dance number while the hero escapes.

Parveen Babi, Asha Parekh, Kader Khan and the actor known as Pran co-star. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1. The cinematography is soft or overly blurry at times, but otherwise the image is sharp and the transfer looks terrific, with bright hues and accurate, detailed fleshtones. The sound is centered, and is strong and clear. The songs are generally unremarkable, but are put to good use, adding to the film's sense of pace rather than arresting it, and even the most irritating numbers are simply but nicely staged. The film is in Hindi with permanent English subtitles. The subtitles have an occasional typo, but that is no match for the jacket text describing the plot, which completely misconstrues the word, 'acquitted' (or 'falsely'), when intending the meaning of its opposite ("Kallu is falsely acquitted and sent to prison..."). There is no menu and no chapter encoding.

Bachchan has two roles in the wonderful 1979 tale of international intrigue directed by Shakti Samanta, **The Great Gambler**, another Leomark Blu-ray (UPC#840418324813, \$20). He plays a professional gambler who has been hired by his backer to fulfill a lucrative arranged marriage in Lisbon, and he also plays a government agent who has been sent to Rome to bust a gang selling government secrets (the bad guys use a 'code' imbedded in the flashing lights behind the dancers in a music video to communicate!). Since the flight to Lisbon also means changing at Rome, the contacts for each character mistake him for the other one.

The film may have been made in 1979, but its Bond-like vibe (the music veers close to Bond music in a couple of spots, but keeps its distances by a note or two) is earlier Seventies and before (one of Bachchan's characters dresses up as a 'hippie' for a disguise in one sequence). We would love to know what Howard Berger, who has made disc commentaries for many international Bond ripoffs, thinks of the film. We were in absolute heaven from beginning to end. A good portion of it was shot on location in Egypt and Europe, but not always in ways you would expect. Not only are there somehow Dutch road signs for a car chase supposedly happening in Italy, but when the hero is escaping the villains from a casino in Venice, he is clearly in Venice as he runs over a Venetian walkway bridge and then leaps into a powerboat parked on a canal, but suddenly, when the villains find their own boat to chase him, he is racing down the canals of Amsterdam (pretending to be Venice—the characters never visit The Netherlands). This is the only movie ever that we have seen that happen, and we were on the ceiling in delight. You would have to expect it, however, since one of the heroines is a 'famous dancer' and is spotted by the emcee at a nightclub she is visiting with the hero. He asks her to come up on the stage and sing a number, and she obliges, but when the camera cuts to her on the stage, she is suddenly in a different outfit, with a different hairdo and different makeup. The plot (yes, the Partition had something to do with Bachchan's characters being separated as children, though how they would completely forget about one another is not explained) is very enjoyable and Bachchan rises to the task of varying his performance just enough to make each character distinctive. The songs are appealing, the many action scenes are energetic and more persuasive than the norm for Bollywood, and, running 169 minutes (the jacket is closer this time, listing it at 162), the film is double the usual pleasures such a production can offer.

Zeenat Aman and Neetu Singh co-star. The picture is letterboxed with

an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1. The transfer is weaker than the other releases. Colors are still fresh most of the time, although hues are a bit off in a couple of reels. The image is off focus quite a bit, so much so that it seems to be a flaw in the transfer and not entirely the cinematography. Still, when a close-up of one of the stars is in reasonable focus, your heart melts. Speaking of the cinematography, you get a complete, standup shadow of the cameraman and his camera in one shot at the Colosseum during a very early morning light. In a couple of instances, characters are in black face, including a butcher who has a wild fight with the hero in what appears to be a meat locker, except that fruit is hanging there along with the meat, all of which get sliced up with the butcher's cleaver. The monophonic sound is passable. The film is in Hindi with permanent English subtitles. There is no menu and no chapter encoding.

If you have the patience to suffer through the 164-minute **Hera Pheri** — **Foul Play**, another Leomark Blu-ray (UPC#840418324820, \$20; and again, the jacket misidentifies the running time, as 157 minutes—the 1976 film is not to be confused with a series of features that had the same title, which began in 2000), everything in the incoherent plot is explained at the end, so that it sort of all makes sense, regardless of how convoluted the narrative may seem as it progresses. The plot summery on the back of the jacket actually sums it up fairly well. "Best friends and con-artists Vijay and Ajay sever their friendship when Vijay discovers that his father's murderer may be Ajay's long-lost father, setting into motion a bloody saga of familial revenge and emotional turmoil." Somewhere over the course of the film that is the plot that unfolds, but from the very start, the relationship between the two protagonists, played by Bachchan and Vinod Khanna, is opaque (did they just meet, or have they been doing this scam a lot?), and piecing together the backstory, the motivations of the women they hook up with (Saira Banu and Sulakshana Pandit costar), and the apparent but very sudden shifts in the relationships is exasperating. Tonally, the film also changes wildly, coming across as clownish at first—several of the action scenes are sped up with the intention of magnifying the laughs—while seeming to become deadly serious and humorless by the end. Normally in these films, when the story continually jumps ahead in time, it helps the drama's momentum, but here the leaps are too far, too fast and it is just plain irritating when you are trying to keep up with everything. The songs are nice, but there are not enough of them, they are too short and the choreography is limited or non-existent. The very best moment happens in the final shot—a blooper that has been left in as part of the film—as the actors and actresses are supposed to pair off but have to stop themselves and switch partners because even they got confused over who is who and what is what.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1. The image quality is uneven. Sometimes it is decent, but it can also be soft or faded, and is generally bland. The monophonic sound is fairly strong. The film is in Hindi with optional English subtitles. There is no menu and no chapter encoding.

Heigl showcase

Before she became famous and, even after winning an Emmy the following year, remained underrated as an actress, Katherine Heigl delivered another exceptional performance in the 2005 thriller, **Zyzzyx Road**, which has been released as a two-platter **4K Ultra HD + Blu-ray** by Dark Arts Entertainment and MVDvisual (UPC#7609137153825, \$40). Directed by John Penney, the film has a pair of major plot twists and it would spoil things to even hint about either of them, but when it starts, Heigl's character, apparently a teenage hooker, is riding into the desert in the night with an accountant, played by Leo Grillo, with whom she has spent a wild and debauched week, and with her boyfriend, dead, in the trunk. The plan is to bury him in the desert, but things do not go as planned. The 81-minute film has a number of great jump screams, and even if that were all it was striving for, it would be worth watching because of the adrenaline-inducing scares and Heigl's beguiling performance. The plot twists, raising the entertainment to another level entirely, make it all the more engaging.

Tom Sizemore is also featured. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The daylight shots are vivid, while darker scenes are clear and sharp most of the time. The 5.1-channel DTS sound has a decent punch and a viable surround presence. The picture on the 4K platter is even sharper and more detailed than the picture on the standard BD platter, and it will basically make you jump higher and farther each time the audio track swats you. There are optional English subtitles; a trailer; a minute-long introduction to the film by Penney and Grillo, still excited after all these years that they'd landed Heigl before her star blasted off; a silent 12-minute montage of storyboards; 7 minutes of side-by-side storyboard and completed film comparisons; 27 minutes of great behind-the-scenes footage (although it is presented in 1 and 2-minute segments without a 'Play All' option); a 6-minute look at the locations when the film was shot and about two decades later; a very good 27-minute interview with Penney, talking about his career (including details about writing stories and screenplays, and working as an editor) and about making the film—having conducted the interview while sitting on a dusty rock, he also rather amusingly gets bit in the butt by something at the end; and—at one point the film had earned the dubious distinction as Variety's 'Lowest Grossing Film of All Time,' a notoriety it has retained entirely because of a bureaucratic hiccup in reporting such matters to the Screen Actors Guild—there is a comedian, Chandler Dean, riffing to jazz music, who has a whole 5-minute monolog as to how that happened, which is also, proudly, included on the disc.

Grillo, who was also the film's producer, provides one commentary

track with his daughter, Meg (she is seen briefly in the film), sharing stories about the production and what went on during the shoot. He describes driving the car himself toward a camera in one shot, because everyone else was too afraid of damaging the camera. He also admits to how much he enjoyed kissing Heigl, and describes the pressure to hold onto her near the end when she landed her breakout part in **Grey's Anatomy**. Penney does the other commentary, prompted by a Dark Arts video producer, going into more details about the specifics of the shoot, working with the actors and the dynamics of the narrative. Actually, though, neither of the commentaries really have much more to offer than what is already covered in an excellent 93-minute retrospective conversation with Penney, Grillo and casting director Valerie McCaffrey about the film and its legacy that distills the best stories from all of the other special features in an entertaining manner as they share their reminiscences, laugh about their foibles, and marvel at not only how making the film was a great experience (despite problems with the brand new digital camera they were trying to use) but how, contrary to Hollywood, they have remained friends ever since.

Some sad things known to man

All the world hates a clown. The weirdness of the hidden, disfigured face and artificially applied expression is not just unnerving, it is the stuff of nightmares. The world hasn't always felt that way, mind you. Clowns were once figures that made children laugh with delight. But that was in more innocent times. Nowadays clowns mean one thing and one thing only—creepy, maniacal killers. At least, that is what the makers of the 2008 horror feature, **100 Tears**, a Manic Entertainment Unearthed Films Blu-ray (UPC#760137172130, \$35), are banking upon. Directed by Marcus Koch and shot in the Tampa Bay area, a clown is extracting revenge upon the world by mutilating anyone he can grab while using an oversized meat cleaver. In addition to the clown, who is a hulking, older man, never speaking or removing his makeup, there is also a quite obviously lifted Harley Quinn character, on a killing rampage of her own. Two freelance reporters try to piece together what is happening. Despite the movie's rich potential, there is never any real interest in taking classic clown routines and adapting them for the horror or gore. With the exception of one scene, where he does appear and disappear behind a large column-like structure—just like a classic Laurel and Hardy routine—he only manages to lumber around a buildings hacking people to death, while even though they run as fast as they can, they trip or otherwise let him catch up to them so the blood machines can start pumping again.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1. Colors are drab, but that was clearly how the film was shot and otherwise the transfer appears accurate. The image is reasonably sharp. The film is deliberately set in darkness and shadows to help sell the gore effects, which are both impressive and abundant, but the tradeoff is that you often can't really see what is going in, and when there's nothing to look at, things get dull. This is only accentuated when an occasional scene does take place in a brightly lit environment. The film, momentarily, perks up. Nevertheless, the filmmakers clearly aren't in it for the drama, or even for scares. They are just in it for the severed limbs and vague but disturbing clown images, and to that end they succeed well enough. Do be sure to watch all the way through the credits, because there is message to viewers at the end.

The two-channel stereo sound recording is a little messy, but the disc's replication is sharp and thorough, adding some decent separation effects and a nice rock and blues musical score. There are optional English subtitles.

The film is presented as an *Extended Director's Cut* and runs 95 minutes, with a cute epilog appearing after the end credits that clears up what happened to one of the main characters. In the Extras, the *Original Cut* is included, which runs 93 minutes and does not contain the epilog or a few of the hoariest effects. Along with two trailers, there are 11 minutes of sensibly deleted scenes; 5 minutes of cute bloopers; 23 minutes of behind-the-scenes footage, production designs and retrospective comments; a very good 21 minutes of regular behind-the-scenes footage and interviews; an additional 34 minutes of great outtakes from the previous 21-minute collection (taken together, the footage is really more fun than the actual movie, because you are still exposed to the gore effects, but you see genuine responses to the endeavor, even as the players goof on one another); a 45-minute talk by Koch about different aspects of the film's financing, creation, music choices, specific gore sequences and the movie's rights history; and a 21-minute collection of films Koch made with a video camera during his adolescence (with just a little jiggling and some noises, he made a scary movie about the attic in his house, along with lots of gore experiments in the later films).

Koch and Unearthed's Stephen Biro provide a commentary track on the *Extended cut*, some of which is reiterated in Koch's 45-minute talk, articulating what went on during the shoot and discussing the ins and outs of gore films and low budget filmmaking. "I've heard all sort of horror stories. 'The MPAA, they cut this film. Oh, the evil MPAA.' Whoever we talked to over at the MPAA, like, was awesome to deal with. It was like who'd a thunk that? The guy on the phone was just like, 'Hey, you made a gore film. It's a fun film. I see what you're doing'. If you want an 'R,' here's the cuts that have to be made. If you want a 'PG-13,' here's the rest of the cuts that have to be made. And he said, 'But, you made a gore film. That's what your audience is gonna want, so I suggest, you know, just go uncut.'"

Horror comedy

Sometimes you come across a low budget movie where the filmmakers

really don't know what they are doing and are just sort of learning as they go along, but other times you come across one where they know exactly what they have to do to make the best of what they've got. The 101 Films Darkside Releasing and Amcomri Blu-ray release, **Crocodylus Mating Season** (UPC#840418323779, \$20), definitely falls into this second category. Written and directed by Stanley Pomianowski, it is a horror comedy clearly shot on a limited budget, but its self-conscious humor is infectious and its horror and gore are good fun. Chuck Fusca stars as a Florida detective who is called upon by a client, played by Rachel Comeau, whose her brother has gone missing. There are a rash of disappearances around a lake, and a couple of years earlier it is rumored some sort of creature had been causing the same problems. Not only all of that, but the rumors have started up again. The comical timing between Fusca and Comeau is right on the money—even their **Star Wars** jokes work—and once they ramp up their investigation about a third of the way into the 86-minute feature, you lower your defenses just let the 2024 film take you wherever it wants to go. And it goes to some wild places before it is over. Pomianowski, who is not above inserting puns and meta references into the dialog, sustains the humor from the very start (the film also has some terrific animated opening credits), but always with just enough reserve so that the movie isn't really clownish or juvenile, just knowingly amusing—like he's inviting you in on the jokes—and he tries to be as innovative as he can with the horror and gore effects, even though all he has to work with is a lame rubber suit, and teeth that he can put around the camera lens. The film is not quite on the level of the **The Lost Skeleton of Cadavra** (Aug 04), but it is good enough to make a viable double bill, sustaining its laughs amid the gore from start to finish.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2:1. The colors are bright and the image is sharp. The stereo sound has a workable dimensionality. There is no subtitled. A trailer is included and there is a nice string of bloopers during the end credit scroll.

The right Door

Opening to credits on a black screen, the first thing you hear in the 1990 low budget feature issued on Blu-ray by Wild Eye Releasing as one of their Visual Vengeance semi-amateur titles, **The Wrong Door** (UPC#760137128113, \$35), is a radio drama, which tells a fairly complete, little story. When it is over, the black is gone and it turns out that a college professor has been playing the story to his class, as part of a lecture on telling stories with sound. The film's hero is one of the students, played by Matt Felmlee. Later that night, he has a gig job dressing as a jester for a party in an apartment building, but when he gets there he knocks on the titular wrong door. A girl opens the door and pleads with him silently to help her, but the people down the hall grab him for the party, and by the time he gets back there the apartment is empty, the girl is in the back of his car, dead, and someone is following him.

Most of the Visual Vengeance titles are, quite naturally, horror films, because that is best way for beginning filmmakers and would-be filmmakers to earn a profit, particularly back in the heyday of home video. But **The Wrong Door** is a suspense thriller, and it is a perfectly decent one. Running 73 minutes—there is also a slightly brisker 67-minute *Director's Cut* done in 2019—sound plays an important part in the hero's efforts to prove his innocence and identify the killers. Whether it is because of the opening lecture, or because of the patchwork nature of the production—nothing in it happens that does not happen for an affordable purpose—you become very aware as you watch it of how films are built by stories within stories. Every sound effect is a story. Every secondary character interaction is a story. The backstory is a story. And the narrative at hand is, of course, another story. Hence, not only is the film, which was shot in and around St. Paul MN, worthwhile entertainment for those not bothered by its lack of slick production values, it is also, because of its simplicity and budget-restrained staging (there is one shot of the full party, lasting just a few seconds—all of the other shots of the party have just a couple of characters, with the 'noise of the party' filling the audio track), an excellent and teachable demonstration of how movies work.

The picture is in a squared full screen format. The image is grainy and colors are flat, but the transfer has clearly been executed with care. The stereo sound is mostly centered, but the film's audio has also been studiously rendered and is reasonably strong with limited distortion. There are optional English subtitles and Wild Eye's usual enthusiastic abundance of special features. The film had three directors, Bill Weiss, who was in charge of the camera, Shawn Korby, who worked with the actors, and James Groetsch, who also edited the film. There is a very good 30-minute interview with Groetsch giving the entire history of the film's creation and dissemination; a 21-minute interview with Korby talking about the casting and the musical score he composed, as well as sharing his memories about making the film; and a good 37-minute interview with Weiss talking about the camera and the film's finances, as well as providing his perspective on the movie's creation. Also featured is a 2-minute silent color short, *Raiders of the Lost Bark*, that Weiss and Korby made in 1983 about two kids fooling around in a back lot; *The Pizza Man*, another color short, with sound, Weiss made in film school in 1988 running 8 minutes, about a pizza delivery guy trying to meet his delivery deadline but encountering distractions along the way; a comprehensive 43-minute retrospective documentary, much of which is reiterated from the individual interviews but is organized as an effective chronological overview of the film's creation; a very nice 21-minute interview with Felmlee, talking about his experiences as an actor (before he became a flight attendant) and his recollections of shooting **The Wrong Door** ("With the

different guys kind of stepping in at different times to direct it, at first, that was interesting and I liked that idea, so that I could get kind of experience with different people. But then, it got a little confusing at some time because they were all very much involved in wanting to help and, if I remember, there were a couple of times when it got a little tense because everybody was trying to help and I was just trying to get the one thing out and I didn't know who to listen to."); a 14-minute interview with Film Threat's Chris Gore about promoting the film and its worthy attributes (there is also a still-frame presentation of the magazine's original review—ironically, the issue had Jim Morrison on its cover), as well as how he conducted his business model and promoted many such inexpensive independent features; a 2-minute montage of production photos; a 3-minute montage of storyboards; and a trailer

Weiss and Korby provide a nice commentary track, trying their best to recall the shoot (they can't remember whose car they used in one scene) and otherwise talking about the production, the many **Exorcist** influences that are sprinkled through it and the reasoning behind the various choices they made, from financial to artistic. "I suppose we could say that the blackness is definitely intentional. Don't you feel like claustrophobic, choked by the darkness?" "Either that or we just couldn't afford more lights."

Groetsch and producer John Schonebaum provide a second commentary, which is much the same, although they share different stories, providing more insights to low budget filmmaking and going over their experiences.

Oh, and we normally don't pay much attention to this stuff, but the disc also comes with a cute little 'Do Not Disturb' sign you can hang on your own door, promoting the film.

Dinosaurs and skin

Some toy dinosaurs bop around here and there in the cheaply made 1996 **Dinosaur Valley Girls**, a Visual Vengeance Wild Eye Releasing Blu-ray (UPC#760137130154, \$30), and provide some vague suspense in a couple of spots, but the emphasis of the film is its humor and its depiction Amazonian cavewomen learning how much fun cavemen can be. The film begins in the present day. An actor played by Jeff Rector visits a museum and is shown a mysterious amulet. When he grasps it, the device transports him into the past. He meets the women, teaches them about kissing, and introduces them to the bumbling male cavemen, who smarten up when the women show them that kissing is better than the rough stuff. There is quite a bit of topless nudity and plenty of gags that try, at least, to be amusing. Somehow, Karen Black got roped into playing an aloof cavewoman, but has a decent amount of screen time, all things considered. Directed by Don Glut, the 94-minute romp is padded to fill its running time, but is intermittently engaging if the viewer knows what to expect and is open to it. A 94-minute version Glut shot with the actresses keeping their tops on is also included on the disc, in case you want to show the film to the only members of your household who might actually enjoy it.

The film is presented in a squared full screen format. It is rather grainy, but otherwise the colors are fresh and it really doesn't look bad if one accepts its limitations. The monophonic sound is reasonably strong, and the musical score ropes in *Wild Thing* by The Troggs and a cover version of the title music from **Walk on the Wild Side** to blend in with a couple of original songs that sound suspiciously like the original songs in **Kung Fu Rascals** (see below).

Also featured in the supplements are two trailers; five music videos; a brief collection of storyboard comparison in still frame; an impressive 44 minutes of montages of production photos, Polaroids, and other snapshots; 7 minutes of flawed deleted scenes; an interesting 9-minute look at Glut's extensive collection of dinosaur bones, artwork and film memorabilia; and a real fun 24-minute production featurette with lots of behind-the-scenes footage narrated by cognac-voiced co-star William Marshall, which also includes some bloopers.

Glut supplies one commentary track providing a fairly thorough accounting of what happened during the production. He says that Black never wanted to talk about **Trilogy of Terror**, although that was all anybody else wanted to ask her about, and he points out her own comedic contributions to the scenes and how great she was to work with. He also details which other actresses were cooperative and which were less so, and he describes in detail what occurred during almost every sequence as it appears on the screen. "The scene you're going to see coming up here, the stunt, took a lot of time to set up. It took about half a day to set this scene up because Jim McCune, who was doubling for Harrison Ray in the stunt, in the shot, had to fall down this hillside. It was dangerous. It was all slanty, with a lot of rock and gravel. So we spent about a half-day padding the hill, putting all kinds of foam and mattress under there, covering it all up, and then we shot it in slow motion. So that is actually Jim McCune going down the hill. We had to get it in one take. We shot it with two cameras, just in case, so we wanted to intercut, but the other camera didn't really capture what we wanted and we used the one take. Now I always said Harrison Ray had a great smile and I wanted to use that somewhere in the film, capitalize on that smile, and so this final close-up you see here, I said, 'Harrison, I want the biggest smile you can give us.' And I said, 'Just look right into the camera and flash those ivories.' Here's what Harrison gave us."

In a second, more recently recorded commentary, Glut is joined by cult film expert C. Courtney Joyner. They go over some of the same material, but in answering Joyner's questions, Glut provides even more information on different topics than he did the first time through, particularly regarding his work with the cast, the locations and the special effects.

Tantamount to another commentary, Glut talks for 54 minutes in front of a camera about his life (he is a genuine dinosaur expert, among other things) and career, and how the film came to be created. "We all know that dinosaurs and cave people did not live at the same time. They're separated by about 66,000,000 years. But knowing what I know about the history of motion pictures, if you want a caveman movie to be successful, you almost certainly have to have dinosaurs in it. Most filmmakers have not really cared, one way or the other. Just put them together. I've always had that need to explain why they're together, and in the case of **Dinosaur Valley Girls**, I came up with the idea of this almost magical place called 'Dinosaur Valley' where by some environmental or cosmic or whatever reasons, they all kind of got lumped together in the same place."

Do-it-yourself fantasy

On par, pretty much, with the state of graphics in video games when it was made, the 2005 **Despiser**, a Wild Eye Releasing Video Vengeance Blu-ray (UPC#760137167518, \$25), mixes those graphics reasonably well with live action sequences to tell a coherent story about an artist who is jumping back and forth between purgatory and the real world when he has several close brushes with death. In purgatory, he joins several other heroes (one from World War I) to defeat a powerful villain, riding in cars, shooting guns and blowing up endless hordes of attackers. The 2004 **Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow** (Feb 05) also mixed animation with live action, and was a lot more sophisticated in its execution (films like **Sin City** and **300** came later), but for a budget of at least two and maybe even three decimal points less, the 105-minute film, created almost entirely by director Philip J. Cook with the help of a few actors and technicians, is a viable mix of action, metaphysics and romance, with plenty of aggressive car chases, weird monsters and slaughter. It even has a few moments of decent humor.

The point of the Video Vengeance releases is to share movies that were made expressly for the home video market in their day, often tolerating source material that only exists in less than ideal condition. **Despiser**, however, looks pretty good. Presented in a squared full screen format, the graphics are solid and sharp, the live components blend with the animated backgrounds with a reasonable smoothness and no overt distortions, and the fully live sequences are stable and sharp, with accurate fleshtones and bright hues. The stereo sound is generally centered and not too irritating. There are optional English subtitles; two trailers; trailers for two of Cook's other impressive do-it-yourself sci-fi features, *Outworld* and *Invader*; a minute-long montage of production photos in still frame; a minute-long montage of promotional art and photos in still frame; a nice 17-second presentation of the animation leading up to the original DVD menu; 3 minutes of good storyboard comparison clips; 10 minutes of informative deleted scenes that the original video distributor made Cook remove from the film, although the distributor wasn't entirely wrong; 4 minutes of especially amusing bloopers (particularly as Cook tries to direct his children in a brief scene); 13 minutes of quasi blooper/deleted scenes identified as outtakes; an excellent 16-minute production featurette that shows how Cook accomplished his magic and how confused the actors were until they saw the completed feature on the screen; and a good 14-minute interview with Cook and co-star Mark Ryde about the status of the film 25 years later.

There are also two commentaries. On one, Cook describes the creation of each sequence and inserts recorded recollections from cast members Mark Redfield and Gage Sheridan where appropriate. It is an informative talk. On the other commentary, fans Sam Panico and Bill Van Ryn place the movie in the context of its day and wax enthusiastically about the quality of Cook's efforts. While the talk slows down a little bit in the film's second half, it is still a worthy appreciation of what Cook accomplished. "I've read some reviews online, and it really upset me, because it was like, 'God, this movie looks so fake.' To me, it feels like it exists within its own world. I always get weirded out when people say, 'Well, it doesn't look real.' Does it have to look real? Like, isn't it kind a better that it's so stylized and it's kind of become its own artform?"

On the other hand, a great deal of patience and tolerance is required to get through the 102-minute **Kung Fu Rascals**, another Visual Vengeance Blu-ray (UPC#760137135845, \$35). Shot entirely around the Los Angeles area on inexpensive Super8, the film is set in pre-technological times, where a demonic villain sends out his minions to stop three heroes from completing a quest. There are a lot of rubber costumes involved. The 1990 film has two things going for it. One is that the martial arts fight scenes are not bad at times. They are shot correctly, to convey the illusion of blows being traded, and they are plentiful. The other is the film's climax, a battle between two stone titans at a beach location that is not only impressively staged, but takes up a decent amount of time. It would be a winning addition to any budding filmmaker's highlight reel. Mitigating all of this, however, is the intention of the filmmakers to present the movie as a comedy, which is not only not funny, but is painfully tiresome. The film stops dead every time the actors play a scene for laughs, and they do it constantly. One of the villains is presented as effeminate, and it is a measure of how bad the movie is that his timing and delivery is better than everyone around him, even the guys in the frog and pig suits. And if all of that does not make you pause, then just be aware that the filmmakers, intent upon stretching the movie to a sequel, stop the film after the stone titan fight, but don't otherwise have a conclusive ending. Nothing is actually resolved.

The picture quality is another strain. Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1, it is best watched on a small screen. The image is grainy and

smeary, and colors are pale. We have no doubt that the best efforts have been made to convey what the source material has to offer, but what it has to offer is definitely limited. The sound is centered and is sometimes harsh, which doesn't help the humor when it comes to the dialog, either. Beware of the film's theme song, which is as irritating as it is catchy.

The hefty supplement contains two trailers, a 3-minute montage of promotional photos and other memorabilia; a 4-minute montage of good behind-the-scenes photos; a complete still-frame presentation of a lengthy article about the film in the fan magazine, *Film Threat*; a 12-minute interview with *Film Threat*'s Chris Gore, who also distributed the film after promoting it in his magazine, talking about his enthusiasm for independent films and how the home video market worked in the days before DVDs; 57 minutes of terrific behind-the-scenes footage with sound that really conveys the gung-ho spirit with which the film was created; a great 112-minute retrospective documentary interviewing many of the original participants, who talk about their backgrounds, discuss the film's complete history and share details about the shoot, including an explanation, with clips, of how the impressive perspective shots were accomplished; and another 16-minute talk with three of the creators together, including Wang, that adds a few more anecdotes and insights about the film, followed by the initial 10-minute reunion talk between Wang and collaborator Les Claypool III, who at that point are excited about the Blu-ray and just getting started at collecting their memories about shooting the film.

There are two commentary tracks. On one, Wang shares his recollections about shooting the film with Claypool (who also scored the film) and co-stars Johnnie Saiko, Troy Fromin, and Ted Smith. They remember the production vividly and tell all sorts of stories about the near disasters they had while shooting it (and about how they had difficulties finding Asians to be in the cast). At one point, Wang's character rolls down a hillside, and he almost rolled right off a cliff. At another point, one of the group was acting as cameraman and standing in surf when a wave came along. He quickly pushed the camera as far above his head as he could, and it was a good thing, because the rest of him went underwater. The retrospective documentary, however, is a better summary of what went into the film.

Martial arts enthusiasts Justin Decloux and Dylan Cheung supply what is a fairly rewarding second commentary track, even though they react to the movie's scenes in a couple of spots. Most of the time, they talk about what we would refer to as the history of tacky martial arts films, from the Chinese kung fu movies in the Thirties and Forties to **Mighty Morphin Power Rangers** and beyond. They also talk quite a bit about Wang, who worked on several Hollywood features in one capacity or another, sometimes unaccredited (he was instrumental, for example, for designs in **The Predator**), and how you can draw links to quite a number of major films from **Kung Fu Rascals**. They also have no illusions about the movie at hand, but they love it anyway.

"This is what Super8 is supposed to look like."

"I love the textures of Super8, I mean the kind of grainy, blotchy textures of it when you really get into it."

"The nicer something looks, it's not the same. You kind of want how VHS looks, with how Super8 looks, because this is escapism. I don't want it to look like real life. I want to know I'm watching a movie."

"You want the textures that you associate with the art. I mean, that sounds a little bit regressive of us. 'We want it the way we had it when we were children!' But I think that, for us, we associate a certain kind of feeling with film."

Finally, two shorter films that Wang directed have also been included. Wang originated his characters and premise in an undated 35-minute short also titled **Kung Fu Rascals**. Although the film is on a lower level of sophistication in comparison to the already low level feature, that said, it isn't a bad short. Parts of it are actually funnier than anything in the feature film (music from The Three Stooges is applied at one point) and it has a more coherent and straightforward narrative, although most of it is taken up by the three heroes fighting an endless stream of attackers.

A 13-minute squared full screen smeary color short from 1989 directed by Wang, *Code 9*, is about two investigators getting into an altercation with villains in a warehouse. Some of the actors and costumes were then used again in **Kung Fu Rascals**. The film is mostly just confused running back and forth, with a few adequately staged fights in between, but once again, it has an exceptionally good climax, and then ends, as if the climax was sufficient.

A 1982 kung fu film of sorts, **Furious**, is available on Blu-ray as another low budget Visual Vengeance title (UPC#760137172741, \$35). An American production shot in America, the film has virtually no dialog, the soundtrack droning on with a generic symphonic musical score and stray sound effects. The martial arts scenes are earnest, and there are many of them, which is the 72-minute film's only saving grace. Otherwise, it is pretty ridiculous, regardless of whether or not the story turns out to be a dream. The hero, played by Simon Rhee, is a fight instructor who is pulled into a quest that makes no sense whatsoever, collecting medallions from other fighters (who are being turned into roosters and hens) and then traveling to the summit of an elevated rock formation, where he fights the villain, played by Phillip Rhee (the star's brother), while aerial camera angles show just how precarious their battle really is. The fighting is legitimate, although the choreography does not come close to matching even rudimentary Hong Kong productions. Directed by Tim Everitt, die hard martial arts enthusiasts who want to see anything and everything will certainly be interested and perhaps even pleased, but others had best sample the

program before committing to it.

The colors are often light but it seems that the film was shot that way, and the transfer is likely the best that can be coaxed from the material. The image is usually sharp and only hazy, once again, when that is the best the cinematography could do. Because of the nature of the audio track, the sound can be a strain, but the actual effects and voices are reasonably sharp. There are optional English subtitles; three trailers; a 53-minute talk by producer (and co-director) Tom Sartori explaining in rewarding detail the chronology of the film's creation and distribution ("I've never made a dime from this show. It's not sour grapes, I'm just glad that it's out there."); a great 21-minute summary of American low budget martial arts films; a great 10-minute piece on the Rhee brothers, who have had major secondary Hollywood careers; 3 minutes of silent footage showing Sartori and Everitt playing in their rock band, a decent well-lit 15-minute studio performance of the songs used in the film and a rousing, less well-lit 21-minute live performance; a 12-minute collection of Sartori's music videos; and three Sartori 8mm films in a squared full screen format: *Allegiance*, running 7 minutes in sepia-toned black and white, which is a surprisingly well made silent piece about a conflicted Civil War soldier, *Bum Doubt*, running 12 minutes in color with music and sound effects, which is about a homeless guy half-heartedly looking for a job as he wanders around the streets of New York and eventually bumps into the jazz musician playing the score, and *Hong Kong Flew*, running 5 minutes in color with more jazz music presenting a hyper montage of shots on the streets of Hong Kong.

Everitt also supplies a 54-minute monolog, a 29-minute audio-only interview and a good commentary track that embellishes the other talks, explaining how the film was shot in 6 days, how dialog was kept to a minimum so that dubbing in other languages would be easier, how the cast handled their martial arts skills ("The big failure of the movie really is the casting, because the extras that we cast were mostly cast for their karate fighting ability, not for their acting. I think if we had cast for acting it would have been a different cast."), how they stole the bogus end credit scroll from **Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan** because they needed to stretch out the movie's running time and they only had so many cast and crew members, and plenty of other engaging details. "That's my mother-in-law. And we don't know who she is, that's my mother-in-law's friend. They came out to eat chicken for us. To me, they're the most real thing in the movie. Here's the lame magician impressing a little baby, because this is the level that the tricks work at, is that you have to be about 18 months old to be impressed by his sleight of hand, which we thought was hilarious."

Even film fanatics Justin Decloux and Peter Kuplowsky acknowledge that Everitt covers the bases thoroughly on his talk, so that their talk is more a celebration of obscure low budget and self-made movies in general, although they often use **Furious** as their jumping off point to draw parallels to the other films.

"I think there's unfair stakes on filmmakers who think that out the gate they have to make the most perfect movie ever. This is a perfect example. Everybody involved in this film had great careers after this movie, and I think if you showed this movie to a Hollywood agent, they would be like, 'This is ridiculous. This is like unprofessional and doesn't make any sense and is completely incoherent.' But for people like us, that maybe have watched too many movies and thrived on seeing eccentricity in filmmaking and different decisions and interesting decisions, this is a movie that is just chock full of interesting decisions. Every scene, I think, is committed to entertain you in some way."

"I think that is the big difference between **Furious** and a lot of other movies that we watch that are **Furious**-like is that sometimes they get caught in maybe the mechanisms of telling a story while **Furious** has none of that. It just wants to throw everything possible at the audience."

Low budget Cursed

A former cop just released from prison is hired by a wealthy dying man to locate his missing grandson in the 2024 crime thriller with a touch of the supernatural, **Cursed in Baja**, an MVDvisual Anchor Bay Entertainment Blu-ray (UPC#760137164975, \$30). Directed by Jeff Daniel Phillips, who also wrote the screenplay and stars as the cop, the film presents a number of confusing flashbacks and only lets out little bits of coherent information at a time, enabling the narrative to move forward steadily while keeping the viewer intrigued. The hero eventually locates the grandson in Mexico, only to discover that not only are drug cartels involved, but there is a literal monster to be circumvented as well. Running 80 minutes, the film has a viable amount of gore and is a passable blend of suspense, horror and action.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1. The color transfer is consistently fresh and sharp, and darker sequences are as coherent as they are intended to be. The 5.1-channel DTS sound gives the musical score a contributive dimensional presence, although most of the other noises remain centered. There are optional English and Spanish subtitles, and a nice 13-minute featurette about creating the film. Phillips also provides a commentary track, recalling the circumstances under which the individual scenes were shot and how he kept his budget down while staging the production. While he provides plenty of details, however, the best stuff is already shared in the featurette.

Something weird

Looking for something weird? A 2023 film guaranteed to freak out the friends and neighbors you share it with, **Abruptio**, has been released on Blu-

ray by Anchor Bay Entertainment (UPC#760137165132, \$30). It is set in the real world, sort of, but is enacted by large, mannequin-like puppets with fleshy faces and arms, and red guts that go spilling out all over the place once the murders start. The puppets are voiced by actors, including Jordan Peele, Sid Haig and Robert Englund. Running 95 minutes, the film actually takes a little while to figure out what is going on, and it doesn't really become enjoyable until the final half hour—if you can last that long—after which there is a somewhat logical explanation for what is happening. Before that half hour, the hero is a middle-aged man, living with his parents, who is compelled to perform missions, slaughtering people, because of something that has been implanted in his head and will explode if he does not obey. Others like him who do not obey do indeed explode. He is also rewarded for the bloodshed, however, gaining a car, a nice wad of cash and a comfortable looking house. It is best not to step much further into the narrative, not so much because things would be spoiled (you probably can't spoil the film) but because it works a little better than it sounds. The story, however, does go off on a couple of other tangents—he meets a nice girl; there is an alien invasion—before doing its best to mix an explanation with ambiguity. So much for the story, however. You can put the film on Pause at almost any moment and anyone walking into the room is going to think the show is very weird. Take it off of Pause and it will seem even weirder. The puppets are doubled by real humans in long shots and in shots showing just their feet, but otherwise they are these puffy, human-looking things, with soulless eyeballs that seem vaguely disconnected from the rest of the face. The voices and the stiff but realistic movements, however, are enough to give them life, at least an imaginary movie one, and from there the fantasy and gore carry you along. Or, you'll turn it off after the first 5 minutes.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1. The color transfer is fresh and the image is sharp, although with the amount of detail that has been put into the puppets, you really don't want it to be. The 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound has a workable dimensionality. There are optional English subtitles and a pretty good 5-minute collection of interviews with the filmmakers. For a more elaborate explanation of what the film is about and how it was put together, director Evan Marlowe and his collaborator and producer, Kerry Marlowe, provide a commentary track, detailing the planning and shooting experiences surrounding each scene and going over all of the intricate and unanticipated challenges they faced every step of the way.

"You don't think about them, but I did the blinks in a computer after the fact. It just made life so much easier than having somebody else manning the blinking mechanism."

"We did have one in the first puppet we tested that had like a motorized blink. But sometimes you'd get one eye going up and down, and it was just really random, so it just made sense to do that in post."

And on a second commentary track, puppeteer Danny Montooth—essentially, the only actor within the film—talks about the specific requirements each scene called for and how he executed many of the movements. His talk does have gaps at times, but it is continually intriguing if one is interested in how the movie's unique accomplishment was achieved. "His teeth did not connect to the inside of his mouth, so he's sort of collapsing on himself a little bit. The mouth plate had some problems, but I think that added to his creepiness in the final image."

Puzzle film

An epistemological puzzle film that functions like a dime store **Mulholland Drive**, **The Beast**, has been released on Blu-ray by Janus Films, Sideshow and The Criterion Channel (UPC#715515306812, \$30). Directed by Bertrand Bonello, the film runs a substantial 147 minutes—it doesn't help that the disc will not restart where it left off if playback is terminated—and has two significant and separate parts (although they are intercut here and there), with a third narrative woven through the other two. That third narrative appears to be about virtual reality, and apparently features a woman undergoing therapy by experiencing the other two stories, although it begins and sometimes twists into being about making the film at hand, in front of a green screen. Of the other two stories, the first, inspired by a Henry James tale, is set in Paris during the great 1910 flood and is about the wife of a wealthy dollmaker who is attracted to a younger artist despite her happy marriage. The second is set in contemporary Los Angeles where an aspiring model is caretaking a luxurious house and is being stalked by a self-declared incel. Léa Seydoux, who has a strong Naomi Watts vibe, and George MacKay star in both stories, with Seydoux also the central figure in the third narrative. The first story is quite pleasing. The effects are impressive, the costumes and décor are appealing and the story gains an even stronger resonance because of the immediate parallels between the potentials for virtual reality and the purpose of dolls. The second story has some pizzazz—the house is really cool—but never rings true, as there is simply no way on earth that MacKay is a good enough actor to convey that he has never kissed a woman before. Especially with the clothing he is wearing. When that story finally accumulates its suspense beats—he's in the house on the security cameras!—it is momentarily enjoyable again, but the filmmakers have no idea how to end it and so they revert to the virtual reality puzzle and leave it to the viewer to choose which ending they like the best. A QR code appears on the screen at the conclusion, which is what you have to access to read the film's credits that would have otherwise made the running time even longer.

In the film's favor, the picture, which has a variety of aspect ratios, and the 5.1-channel DTS sound are both in excellent condition. The image is

smooth and glossy, and the sound has a finely detailed separation mix. The movie jumps back and forth between French and English, somewhat randomly, and has two English subtitling options to cover everything. The default provides subtitles for the French dialog. Along with a trailer, there is a 16-minute talk by Bonello about what he wanted to accomplish with the movie and where he was coming from. "One of the challenges was not to make three films, to make one film."

Hee-haw

Jerzy Skolimowski's 2022 **Eo** makes an absolutely ideal second half to a double bill with Robert Bresson's 1966 **Au Hasard Balthazar**. **Eo**, which has been released on Blu-ray by Sideshow, Janus Films and The Criterion Channel (UPC#715515288415, \$30), is what people mistake Bresson's film to be, a string of brief vignettes connected together by the presence of a wandering donkey. Running 88 minutes, some of the vignettes are quite entertaining—Isabelle Huppert is featured in one as a woman forced to sell off the contents of her stepson's home to cover his gambling debts; in another, a local soccer team wins a big game because the donkey distracts the kicker on the opposing side, and when they celebrate afterwards they include the donkey in their festivities—and almost all of them, whether very brief or a little longer, are steadily engaging. The cinematography is consistently appealing, and is especially striking if one has just come away from the black-and-white **Au Hasard Balthazar**. Although there is a pervasive theme throughout the film underscoring how people ignore the souls not just of donkeys but of all animals—even the people who care about the animals—the narrative never accumulates enough substance to exceed a constant superficiality, and the transitions the donkey goes through to get from one place to the next are rather far fetched at times. It is enough to entertain, and it is a basic, well made film, but there is no deeper reward to its amusements, however serious they may seem.

The film does not start up where it left off if playback is terminated. The picture is in a squared, full screen format, and the color transfer is smooth and precise. The 5.1-channel DTS sound has a functional dimensionality and special attention has been paid to donkey noises. The film is mostly in Polish, but there are also parts in English, Italian and French, and there are optional English subtitles, along with a trailer, a 24-minute interview with Skolimowski explaining how he film was conceived and shot, and a 4-minute piece about the six donkeys that played the title character.

Bresson was a master at making people think his superficial filmmaking technique—often using amateur performers, and oblique narratives—had some sort of great, deep meaning to them, but they pretty much never do. **Au Hasard Balthazar** shows up all too often on lists of the greatest films ever made, but it really doesn't belong there. It is a rewarding movie, but it is not that rewarding. We reviewed a Criterion Collection DVD in Jun 06, and Criterion has since issued the film on Blu-ray (UPC#715515215510, \$40) with an improved picture transfer.

Set in the French Pyrenees, the donkey's years are spent in and around a single village, and while ownership does change hands a number of times, there are bits and pieces of a genuine narrative always going on in the background, mostly about the daughter of a school teacher and the two men in her life, the 'good' son of her father's landlord, who pines for her long after he ought to have started looking elsewhere, and the 'bad' delinquent she can never get enough of, who grows up to become a smuggler. Running 95 minutes, the film also follows several other characters and examines how post-War technological progress upends the rural area's economic stability. And yeah, you do see the donkey being mistreated and ignored, and you come to understand that he is also one of the Lord's beings and a more respectable one than any of the humans, whose choices feel arbitrary and capricious compared to the logical choices made by the donkey. That is why, as donkey entertainment, the two films make such a great double bill, each one adding a legitimacy to the other through their shared but otherwise unique topic.

The film is presented with an aspect ratio of about 1.66:1. The DVD transfer looked great, but there were occasional markings and other wear, all of which have been eliminated in the fresh BD transfer. The image is immaculate. The monophonic sound is also stronger and clearer. The film is in French with optional English subtitles, and the special features from the DVD have been carried over, including a trailer, a 62-minute 1966 French TV program about current cinema that includes an interview with Bresson, and a dubious 14-minute, overly enthusiastic appreciation of the film by the normally reliable Donald Ritchie.

Backwoods comedy

A hillbilly farce and haunted house comedy, Universal's 1945 **Murder, He Says**, is available as a Universal Kino Lorber Incorporated **KL Studio Classics** Blu-ray (UPC#738329244873, \$25). Fred MacMurray is a professional pollster who wanders into the backwoods in search of his colleague and stumbles into scheming family of hicks looking for a stash of stolen money in a decrepit house full of secret passages and such. Marjorie Main is the matriarch. Helen Walker, Peter Whitney (playing twins!) and Porter Hall co-star. MacMurray's skills in slapstick are put to good use, and the film manages to build upon its basic, inherently amusing premise with inspired plot turns and discoveries. Running 91 minutes, the film probably played very well on television in that you can pretty much drop into it at any point and surmise enough about what is going on to remain engaged. Directed by George Marshall, the antics may not be enough to make one laugh aloud, but they will certainly

generate a smile now and then.

The black-and-white picture is in a squared full screen format. The image is reasonably sharp and spotless, enhancing one's concentration on the cast's comedic timing and the inspired production designs. The monophonic sound is okay and there are optional English subtitles and a trailer. There is a commentary featuring film enthusiasts Michael Schlesinger and Stan Taffel. Even though they run out of steam a bit in the last act, they still do a good job going over the film's production quirks (it was originally intended as a vehicle for Bob Hope to follow up **Ghost Breakers**), discussing the careers of the cast and the crew and how their skills are being utilized in the film, providing appropriate artistic insight (the compare the film viably to **Texas Chainsaw Massacre**) and sharing other fascinating filmmaking arcana (in the Thirties, actors doing scenes that involved hay were often plagued by hay ticks).

Fin de siecle

The first movie spinoff of the Julian Fellowes television series, **Downton Abbey**, turned out to be such a lucrative hit that it unfortunately opened the door to the rabble of a sequel, **Downton Abbey A New Era**, which has been released on DVD by Focus Features (UPC#191329216187, \$30). Where the initial film was a good deal of fun, effectively raising the stakes of the series (the king of England visits!) while wrapping up a few of the loose ends the series conclusion had not taken care of, the 2022 sequel plays more like a television episode itself than many of the show's episodes did, and will be useless to all but the most invested fans. In typical TV episode fashion, there are two entwined narratives—a primary one (the 'A' story, in TV speak), in which a film crew comes to shoot a movie using the titular English mansion as its location (the segment also unabashedly utilizes the plot of **Singin' in the Rain**)—and a secondary one (the 'B' story, in TV speak), where a number of the characters, displaced by the commotion, visit a villa on the French Riviera that has come into their possession (a ruckus is caused when the reason for that possession is investigated). Written by Fellowes, the 124-minute film then ends with a funeral for one of its primary characters, attempting to recover before the final credits by having all of the remaining characters seem cheerful after the funeral is over. It is such a pointless exercise that even fans will feel restless and embarrassed as the story grasps at the straws of entertainment to justify its presence, but the real disappointment is that the movie is set right on the cusp of the Great Depression and World War II, two events that 1) are suggested by its title, and 2) would surely have created far more dramatic conflict for the characters and their way of life than the piffle being offered up instead.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The color transfer is lovely and polished. The 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound has a pleasing dimensionality, particularly whenever the show's original theme seeps into John Lunn's musical score. Directed by Simon Curtis, Hugh Bonneville, Maggie Smith, Jim Carter (the illness his character acquired at the end of the series has gone into a mysterious remission for the feature films) and Elizabeth McGovern star, with Hugh Dancy, Dominic West and Laura Haddock presented as fresh characters, members of the movie crew. There is an audio track that describes the action ("A steamship sails on the English Channel."), alternate French and Spanish audio tracks, optional English, French and Spanish subtitles, and 34 minutes of enjoyable promotional featurettes that includes a touching moment in which the entire cast and crew salute Smith. Curtis also supplies a commentary track, just basically underscoring the narrative as it goes along (he claims the movie is based upon the transition Alfred Hitchcock's **Blackmail** underwent during production, but no, it's **Singin' in the Rain**) and then mentioning little odds and ends about the cast, the crew and the production along the way. "Someone told me they'd done over sixty-five dinner scenes over the history of the series."

Gore anthology

Eight gruesome stories, with a ninth one bookending and interlacing the others, are contained in a 2024 anthology released on Blu-ray by Unearthed Films, **The Profane Exhibit** (UPC#760137158912, \$40). Each film was made at a different time by a different director and crew, and most contain substantial and graphic male or female nudity, and gore. Since the collection runs just 108 minutes, you can do the math to understand that most of the individual tales are little more than conceptual settings devised to create some torture porn. The linking piece, for example, is just a depiction of a human body being cut up and ground into meat, only it is played in reverse so that the final scene in the movie depicts how the man was killed. A couple of the stories have prominent cast members, including Ellen Greene playing the head of a convent who feels compelled to inflict punishment not only upon her charges, but upon herself, and Clint Howard appears in a story about a suburban couple who keep their daughter locked up in the basement. Among the directors are Ruggero Deodato, Yoshihiro Nishimura, Sergio Stivaletti and Uwe Boll. In the best piece, which is also strikingly photographed, a doctor in Nazi Germany is called in to save a child from diphtheria, performing a tracheotomy (quite graphically), but when he learns that the child is mentally challenged, he executes the boy instead. The parents appear to get upset, but there is a clever and psychologically legitimate twist in the end. In a couple of other stories, the blood is justified by the narrative, including a decent horror tale about a woman who discovers a secret in a dungeon, and is forcibly changed into an animal, only to take revenge on the men who mutilated and mutated her, and a relatively cute tale about a serial killer who comes home at night to an overly obedient wife, until she follows him one night. In a less interesting segment, a staged reenactment of a man's childhood

abuse trauma goes wrong, until the staging is embellished by his own participation. The other stories push boundaries so far as blood and torture are concerned (except for one, where a pair of children meet a potential suicide on a bridge, which has some nice scenery but nothing else to offer), but do not have the psychological or dramatic foundations to go beyond their perverse titillations.

The aspect ratios vary from story to story. Generally, the color transfer looks good and the image is sharp. Some of the stories are in Japanese, German, Spanish or Italian, while others are in English, and there are optional English subtitles for just the foreign language sequences or for everything, as well as optional Spanish subtitles. The stereo sound has a passable dimensionality, with an emphasis upon the rock music in the score.

Along with a trailer and a good 12-minute montage of production and publicity photos from the film, there are several interviews with the producer who conceived and oversaw all of the pieces, Amanda Manuel. She is part of a 34-minute question and answer segment at a premiere (they do it standing up, rather than the usual chair or stool arrangement, which can give you an idea of how below-the-radar the film is), along with the director of the grand cannibalistic S&M segment that concludes the film, Michael Todd Schneider, and she explains, "Initially it was, like, NC-17. I wanted to make the most brutalist film, like, ever and then it kinda started getting a little bit softer and then I went to like edit some of the stuff out that I was getting from other countries because it was obviously, there's no way I could show some of this stuff." The two are also featured in another interview from the premiere, running 13 minutes, where they provide a clear explanation of how the film originated and how Maurizio Guarini of the Goblins became involved with the music (David Klotz also did some of the score). In another 11-minute interview with Manuel, she talks about how she became interested in horror as a child ("If I was staying at my grandma's for the weekend, I would go into her purse and I would take her eyeglasses and hide them from her so when we were at the checkout at the video store, she would just bring in these shows not knowing...I probably shouldn't have been watching some of those shows.") and shares more stories about how she gathered the different pieces together. Along with a 13-minute interview with Schneider in which he talks about the films that influenced him as a child, he also presents a 24-minute piece that includes another short constructed with alternate and deleted footage from his short in the film (it has substantially more dialog). Manuel gets a real kick out of it when he shares it with her on his phone.

Also featured is a 14-minute collection of behind-the-scenes footage from the making of the short where a woman is turned into an animal, which is set to a musical score and presented as a short film all of its own, because the effects are so gruesome even when you can see how they are applied. There is a 12-minute interview with Boll talking about where he came up with his segment (the Howard piece) and how it was executed; a 21-minute interview with editor Jeremy Kasten talking the movies he liked as a child and also going over how they reversed the piece that links the films together; and a 15-minute retrospective piece about making the Nazi segment.

Finally, there is a commentary with Manuel and Schneider, prompted by gore film journalist Art Ettinger, where they discuss the background behind each piece as it comes up and how they designed the film for a specific group of fans. "One of the irritating things that critics of extreme entertainment do is they try to ascribe ideologies to the filmmakers based on the characters, meaning, 'Oh, this movie has a awfully misogynistic character in it,' and then they call the movie misogynistic. Nothing drives me crazier than that. This is obviously a very female-driven production, and there is a type of media critic who would refer to a lot of this as misogynistic, which is misguided." That said, when the specific appeal of a piece is in how its depiction of violence against a woman is intended to titillate, regardless of its depiction of violence against a man presented with similar intentions in a subsequent episode, the ethics of such a production is not cut and dried.

Gore hit job

A hit job directed at an irrelevant public figure, the 2024 **The Climate According to Al Al Gore**, a Highway 61 Entertainment DVD release (UPC#760137166818, \$15), is a complete 110-minute biographical profile of the former Vice President and Nobel Prize winner, which is intended to discredit the concept of climate change even as it becomes more obvious with every passing day. Anyway, the director, Joel Gilbert, has put a lot of work and research into the program, so it is fairly interesting since, despite its snide approach, it nevertheless supplies a comprehensive archival presentation of Gore's entire life up to the Green New Deal, including a lengthy portrait of his father's political career and other minutia. Gilbert once worked for Gore as a Senate intern, although it is also revealed that he has worked for Ted Cruz, as well, so go figure. At the very beginning, he states that, as the film's title implies, he is using an Artificial Intelligence rendering of Gore and Gore's voice to tell the story. It comes across as breathlessly lame, and thus the scandals Gilbert articulates, from the use by Gore's father of cattle to launder funds, to Gore's own lifting of concepts regarding the environment from a bestseller in the Fifties, seem not so much scurrilous as business as usual for the day. What Gore accomplished was to articulate something that everybody who had been to grade school already knew (just ask the insurance companies), but he gathered it in one place and communicated the urgency of addressing it more successfully than anyone else had or, apparently, could. Despite Gilbert's attempts to undercut him now, the only reason Gore has lost his relevancy is because he was right and the world is too overwhelmed to care any more.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The color transfer looks okay and the sound is generally centered. There is no captioning.

Blues concert

A 53-minute contemporary blues 2006 charity concert for hurricane relief, **The Fabulous Thunderbirds Live in Houston**, has been released on Blu-ray by Cleopatra (UPC#889466632884, \$25). The keyboardist, Gene Taylor, and the lead guitarist, Kirk Eli Fletcher, are great, and the video reliably provides close-ups of their fingering at appropriate moments. Both the camera movement and the editing are nicely matched to the rhythm of the music and bring to the presentation what flair the concert has to offer. The other members of the band competently fill their supporting roles. The lead vocalist, Kim Wilson, however, is another matter. That his harmonica playing is better than his singing is not in anyway praise of his skill with the harmonica. His vocals are inarticulate and bland, and transform what could be a truly lively concert into background music that won't interfere with your drinks or conversation.

The image is bright and spotless. The 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound is not vivid but has a suitable dimensionality and presents the separations with an adequate clarity. There is no captioning.

How green was Vallee?

One of the first popular singers to temper his voice for the microphone, Rudy Vallee is mostly forgotten today, but he had a long and successful life and, in his heyday, he made a few movies, too. If you only know him from the crackerjack job he did in **How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying** (Jul 02), however, then you may be taken aback by how terrible his performance is in the 1929 Radio Pictures musical, **The Vagabond Lover**, a Roan Group Troma Team DVD release (UPC#785604209293, \$10). Vallee seems to be reading his lines off of cue cards much of the time, and often has the expression of a deer caught in the headlights. His character is the leader of an amateur 'jazz' band that is mistaken for an established group, and go along with the misimpression so they can perform. Vallee's character also falls in love with the granddaughter of the philanthropist who has booked them to play a big charity gig, and by the time the truth has been discovered, too many wheels have been set in motion. To be fair, talking pictures were still a new thing (the film also has a few intertitles), but where some performers took talkies in their stride, Vallee apparently decided that at that point in his life, a straight musical performance and recording career was best for him. Along with the title song, Vallee sings *If You Were the Only Girl in the World (and I Was the Only Boy)* and a few other numbers. The 65-minute film is mostly staged in the static manner that was necessitated by the sound recording restrictions of the day, and it doesn't help that the full screen black-and-white source material contains a lot of splices (the copy we viewed also froze periodically), along with scratches and speckles, disrupting the flow of both the dialog and the music. The monophonic sound is tolerable, all things considered, and there is no captioning.

A 4-minute introduction is included that tries to excuse some of the film's shortcomings, along with a text profile of Vallee, *Chapter One* from the 1939 Republic serial, **Zorro's Fighting Legion** (Sep 90), running 28 minutes, and a minute-long Troma promotional piece. Also featured is a very sweet, undated 5-minute interview with Vallee's wife, Eleanor, who first met him when she was 14 (she was tall for her age). She talks about their life together, about their dogs, and about his success as one of the first pop stars of the modern era.