

Discovering the past

An Italian documentary program with English narration (once in a while, there is an awkwardly-turned phrase), twenty-seven 25-minute episodes of Secrets of Archeology are spread to six platters on the Koch Vision boxed set release (UPC#741952637295, \$90). Each episode in effect summarizes what is known about a specific group of ruins, and, central to the series, the best guesses of how those structures once appeared are presented with computer graphics. The narration is the only information provided. There are no interviews with archeologists, although the efforts of famous archeologists of the past are described in the course of the narrative here and there. There are also thumbnail profiles of the individuals responsible for or honored by various structures. The narration is held mostly to specifics about the designs and topographies of the sites depicted or the historical events that occurred there, and speculation is limited to specific functions of specific items. In other words, the 2002 program does not stimulate your intelligence the way that the best documentary programs do, but it does supply an excellent, reasonably up-to-date knowledge base that can serve as a fine starting point in the exploration of historical dynamics.

The full screen picture has sharp, solid colors. The sound is centered but clear, and there is no captioning. Most of the programs concern sites and topics close to the Mediterranean Sea, but there are a few set in the Americas. There is no apparent order to the arrangement of the episodes from a historical or geographical standpoint. The topics covered include: Pompeii, Rome during different phases of its history, Egypt during different phases of its history, Athens, the Etruscans (one of the more interesting episodes), Greek settlements in Italy and Sicily, the pyramids of Mexico, the Incas, the Mayans, Greek settlements in what is now Turkey and other parts of Asia, Greece in Roman times, ports of the Middle East, the Phoenicians, Rome's settlements in Africa, Hannibal and Carthage, Rome's settlements in France and Spain, ancient Persia, Roman Tripoli, the island of Minos, temples for the worship of Apollo, the islands of the Ionian Sea, and the search for Troy and other sites of legend and literature.

An IMAX program covering some of the same territory, Greece The Secrets of the Past, is available from Big Picture DVD Productions and Image Entertainment (UPC#014381346626, \$20). The 45-minute film directs most of its attention at the island of Santorini, attempting to date the volcano eruption that blew most of the island away several millennia ago, but it also examines ruins and artifacts from later periods. Like many IMAX features, the narrative content of the 2006 production avoids becoming too complicated or too detailed, and draws generalized summaries of the accomplishments of ancient Greece while depicting and explaining a few legitimate archeological projects, and toying with some of the same computer enhancements that were used in Secrets of Archeology. It's the kind of show that Melina Mercouri used to narrate, but now must make do with Nia Vardalos. Bridging these moments, however, are what IMAX does best—breathtaking, vivid aerial shots of Santorini and other Aegean islands, and an amazing, worth-the-price-of-the-DVD flyover view of Athens, which is probably the most unrecognizable (and colorless) famous city in the world save for its one landmark ruin, shot on a pristinely clear, smog-free day.

The picture is presented in letterboxed format only, with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The image is fresh and vivid, and it is only when the camera journeys underwater that there are hints of the inevitable digital artifacting. The musical score has a strong Greek flavor and is well served by the dimensionality of the 5.1-channel Dolby Digital track and similarly crisp DTS track. There is no captioning. Also featured is a good 22-minute production featurette, a 16-minute montage of the flyover sequences set to the musical score in standard stereo, an 11-minute promotion of IMAX film company MacGillivray Freeman Films programs, a brief Greek history timeline, a trivia quiz, and a text profile of director Greg MacGillivray.

ief and the Cob

A travesty that fortunately does not occur too often any more, The Weinstein Company Home Entertainment has released a spectacularly conceived widescreen film in cropped format only, The Thief and the Cobbler (UPC#796019795630, \$20). The LD (Apr 97) was fully letterboxed, and the 1993 film, as it was presented there, was a bedazzling accomplishment in animation, not just telling the standard tale about a lowly peasant who rescues an Arabian princess from an evil suitor with a viable amount of action and wit, but using the compositional arts to accentuate the film's emotional dynamics. Every part of the image was expressively detailed and exquisitely colored, and much of the film's humor came from the manner in which the characters navigated their almost abstract environment. With televisions getting bigger and bigger, the DVD could have been one of the jewels of the holiday season, but instead it slaps the film's artistry in irons and throws away the key. How can the humor work when you can't see the reactions of the characters? How can the magic work when you can't see the intricacies of balance and counterpoint in the conception of the images? What you get instead is an overly applied all-star voicecast (Matthew Broderick is the hero and Jennifer Beals is the heroine, though Vincent Price has some nice moments as the villain) trying to rip-off Aladdin and not being anywhere near as funny. In reality, the film left Aladdin's visual splendors in the dust,

where, so far as DVD is concerned, it now languishes itself.

The 73-minute program has a modestly dimensional stereo soundtrack, an alternate French track in stereo and optional English and Spanish subtitles.

Looney Scrooge

Following in the footsteps of everyone from Mickey Mouse to Mr. Magoo, Daffy Duck takes center stage in the Warner Home Video release of a new Christmas Carol adaptation, Bah, Humduck! A Looney Tunes Christmas (UPC#012569804425, \$20). Running 46 minutes, the duck is the money-obsessed CEO of a large department store who drives his employees like a slave master until a fateful night where he is visited by three ghosts. All of the parts are filled by popular Looney Tunes characters, with Bugs Bunny kind of standing on the side, like a Greek chorus. This is not the Looney Tunes of old by any matter of means, but the humor is heavy on physical slapstick and every once in a while there is a good, funny gag—just often enough to prevent the 2006 production from being a waste of time.

The full screen image is brightly colored and crisp. The 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound is best held at a modest volume but has a reasonably strong dimensionality. There are alternate French and Spanish tracks in standard stereo, English captioning, 5 minutes of deleted and alternate scenes, a pleasant orchestral music video, and a decent direction game.

Zeppelin then and now

Your radar is always out for unauthorized patch jobs, but Led Zeppelin The Origin of the Species, from Sexy International (UPC#88768-3000059, \$20), is the real thing, an excellent 71-minute documentary about the foundation of the rock group, Led Zeppelin, with substantial music cuts, rare footage, photos and even gossip about the various bands each member participated in before they put Zeppelin together and changed rock forever (from the 'tinny' sound of groups like The Yardbirds). There is also an excellent analysis of the music and its roots on the first two Zeppelin albums. Oh, and the band deliberately misspelled the group's name so Americans wouldn't mispronounce the first word and think the name meant the zeppelin in front. The only thing missing is an explanation of that curious pre-echo in Whole Lotta Love, but maybe someday, somebody will tell us why it is there.

The picture is presented in letterboxed format only, with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1 and no 16:9 enhancement. The picture quality is fine. The stereo sound is mostly centered, but clear. There is no captioning. Also featured is a 21-minute interview about the formation of The Yardbirds, text profiles of the interviewees and a trivia quiz.

The voice of Zeppelin's lead singer has dropped a few octaves, but it retains reflections of what it used to be, and he still knows how to deliver a decent mix of blues and rock in the Zoë Vision release, Robert Plant and the Strange Sensation (UPC#011661219090, \$20). The 2005 Chicago soundstage concert runs 66 minutes, with Plant shifting between a few choice Zeppelin favorites and other numbers that are just as pleasing, including his rendition of Girl from the North Country. Like the studio audience, he seems to be having a very good time, and also seems to be energized by the young members of his back-up band. Somebody should whisper to him, however, that the wiggling his hips bit is only going to attract elderly women with canes.

The picture is presented in letterboxed format only, with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The picture is very sharp and accurately detailed. The 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound has a full dimensionality and plenty of power. There is no captioning.

Young and Demme collaborate

Jonathan Demme has worked out a sub-career for himself making movies of his favorite rock musicians in action, and so in a 2005 film, audiences were treated to Neil Young Heart of Gold, which has now been issued by Paramount as a Special Collector's Edition (UPC#097363466949, \$30). Young himself enjoys exploring genres and phases, and for the Nashville concert Demme was recording, Young was on a strong country-western bent, joined by Emmylou Harris, Ben Keith and others. Indeed, while by and large the show is terrific, blending many Young hits with enjoyable covers of a few classics such as Four Strong Winds, one number he includes, When God Made Me, has such a bland, Sunday School simplicity to it that it almost stops the show dead. But that's how Young operates, always preferring to explore every parameter of his art rather than to settle for what has proven the most popular. Demme's experience lends a sense of authority to the program as a whole, and that one number aside, the 103-minute film moves smoothly.

The picture is presented in letterboxed format only, with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. There is both a 5.1-channel Dolby Digital track, which has a decent delivery, and a DTS track, which has even sharper definitions and clarity. There are optional English subtitles, and an additional number running 6 minutes has also been included.

The second platter has 87 minutes of interviews and behind-the-scenes material, which effectively reinforce the sense of posterity being applied to the film, and there is a great 3-minute clip from a TV appearance Young made in 1971.