

Salome ★★

(2011) 112 min. In German w/ English subtitles. DVD: \$29.99, Blu-ray: \$39.99. Arthaus Musik (dist. by Naxos of America).

Richard Strauss's voluptuously decadent 1905 opera, based on the biblical story of the beheading of John the Baptist due to the machinations of King Herod's seductive stepdaughter, receives a curiously flat reading in this 2011 mounting from the Baden-Baden Festival. Nikolaus Lehnhoff's production showcases a vaguely abstract set, modern costumes, and contemporary props (including automatic rifles for the tetrarch's guards); but the more serious weakness is musical. Stefan Soltesz's conducting is overly restrained, and the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin sounds bland, although some of the problem might lie in the recording, as the music is too often kept in the background. While Kim Begley makes a fine Herodes, Doris Soffel an impressive Herodias, and Alan Held an imposing Jochanaan, Angela Denoke disappoints as the title character, with singing that alternates between shrill and pallid (she also looks too old for the role and her pale pink cocktail dress and pixie haircut seem out of place). The combination of a weak orchestra and a miscast Salome—along with Lehnhoff's mediocre staging—makes even the Dance of the Seven Veils, usually a show-stopper, a letdown. Presented in Dolby Digital 5.0 (DTS-HD 5.0 on the Blu-ray release) and PCM stereo, this production pales in comparison to other versions (see *VL-5/06* and *VL-3/09*). Not a necessary purchase. (F. Swietek)



Santana: Greatest Hits—Live at Montreux 2011 ★★1/2

(2011) 167 min. DVD: 2 discs, \$24.98; Blu-ray: \$19.98. Eagle Rock Entertainment (avail. from most distributors).

Did the last 40 years even happen? You wouldn't think so watching Carlos Santana finger the first guitar riff from 1970's "Black Magic Woman" (which was actually written by Fleetwood Mac): the man looks and sounds exactly the same. Playing for nearly three full hours, Santana and his smooth backing band perform some two dozen songs (more in medleys) during this fine 2011 concert from Montreux. You can fast forward through the WTF-opening—a freeform jazz cacophony followed by an equally head-scratching rap cover of AC/DC's "Back in Black"—to find the familiar Latin-African tinged rhythms of early Santana classics such as "Oye Como Va," "Jingo," "No One to Depend On," and "Evil Ways," among others. Although the audience comes alive for the axe-master's contemporary hits off the 1999 bestseller *Supernatural*, lead singers Tony



Lindsay and Andy Vargas are no match for the distinctive stylings of the originals—Rob Thomas on "Smooth" and The Product G&B on "Maria, Maria." Guest stars Derek Trucks and Susan Tedeschi bring their blues-based guitars to the mix on "Make Somebody Happy/Right On Be Free," while Santana's new bride, Cindy Blackman Santana, displays her drumming chops on "Corazon Espinado/Guajira." Aside from a few wacky choices ("Sunshine of Your Love"?), this "greatest hits" show generally lives up to its name as the dressed-in-white Santana—one of the original guitar heroes—takes viewers on a sultry trip down memory lane while having fun (check the multiple references in "Soul Sacrifice"—including the James Bond theme, *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, and "Light My Fire"). Presented in DTS 5.1, Dolby Digital 5.1 and stereo on DVD, and DTS-HD 5.1, Dolby Digital 5.1, and LPCM stereo on Blu-ray, extras include separate interviews with Santana and his wife, as well as a brief behind-the-scenes montage. Highly recommended. (R. Pitman)

Strange Fruit: The Beatles' Apple Records ★★

(2011) 162 min. DVD: \$19.95. Music Video Distributors (avail. from most distributors).

Although unsanctioned by the Beatles or Apple Records, this profile nonetheless offers an illuminating look at the band's famous label, which they established in 1967 with the aim of providing a haven for artists to forge careers outside the strictures of a major record company. Paul McCartney dubbed it Apple, and the band ran the company with a variety of trusted associates, including Mal Evans and Peter Asher (brother of Jane Asher, formerly of Peter and Gordon). Singer/songwriter Jackie Lomax talks about publishing with Apple, an enterprise that also encompassed film and fashion, including an ill-fated boutique. After Lomax, Apple searched for new artists, finding Mary Hopkin, the Iveys (who became Badfinger), and James Taylor (their first American signing), but Lomax believes they released too much too soon and his first single, "Sour Milk Sea," which features a glittering array of guest stars, was lost in the shuffle. Though Hopkin's "Those Were the Days" sold eight million copies, many others suffered Lomax's fate, and the label passed on future superstars like David Bowie and Fleetwood Mac (McCartney guided Hopkin's career, while George Harrison took Lomax under his wing). When John Lennon associate Allen Klein arrived to stop the bleeding, there were layoffs and losses, including Asher and Taylor. More hits from Badfinger and Billy Preston would ensue, but the breakup of the Beatles further hastened the end. Authors and critics provide most of the commentary here,



backed with relevant archival clips. Recommended. Aud: C, P. (K. Fennessy)

The Swell Season ★★1/2

(2011) 88 min. DVD: \$29.95. Docurama (avail. from most distributors). Closed captioned. ISBN: 1-4229-9552-6.

After toiling in obscurity ("17 years of 40 people"), Irish musician Glen Hansard—who became a busker at the age of 13 and dropped out of school—suddenly rocketed to fame, winning an Oscar for the song "Falling Slowly," which he co-wrote with his decade-younger girlfriend, Czech singer Markéta Irglová, for their indie autobiographical 2006 film *Once*. In this intimate profile from filmmakers Nick August-Perna, Chris Dapkins, and Carlo Mirabella-Davis, viewers go behind-the-scenes, following romantic couple Hansard and Irglová on tour as they perform with a backup band as The Swell Season. Although *Once* was a charming love story, only the most dew-eyed fan could watch this portrait and not see the duo's relationship careening towards the rocks thanks to a familiar combination of fame-related stress, copious liquor, and the surefire bad formula of an older man trying to control a younger, independent woman. Since neither Hansard nor Irglová are overwhelmingly charismatic (a long, tedious, slow-burn argument outside a café near film's end seems to signal the ensuing break-up), the highlights here are mostly musical, as the furiously guitar-strumming Hansard and reserved Irglová play favorites including "When Your Mind's Made Up" and "Leave." Also memorable are the brief scenes with Hansard's mom, who is rightfully proud of her son's Oscar. Although we are left with the notion that the relationship ended on an amiable note and the pair would continue to work together musically, both are now releasing solo albums and touring individually. DVD extras include deleted scenes. A strong optional purchase. (R. Pitman)



New to Blu-Ray

X: The Unheard Music (Music Video Distributors, Blu-ray: \$19.99). Popular West Coast punk band X is captured at the peak of their success in this newly remastered 1985 music documentary (*VL-5/05* ★★1/2) bowing on high-definition Blu-ray with a 5.1 surround soundtrack and a slew of bonus materials, including archival interviews with the filmmakers, new interviews with band members John Doe and Exene Cervenka, a never-before-seen live performance of "Some Other Time," and more.

