

Perfection (Continued)

Collection title (UPC#888574368906, \$22). Competently directed by Mark Robson, that story point provides the climax to the 1949 western, and helps to sustain its suspense, but the movie is actually about the hero's relationship with the four bar girls he has to help along the way, which, truth be told, is a great deal more of Robson's specialty than westerns. Gloria Grahame costars, with Martha Hyer, Myrna Dell, John Ireland and others. Grahame was delectable throughout her career, and is pretty much in her prime for this film, giving her character just enough of an aura of having seen it all to bring an edge to her helplessness. Sterling does a wonderful job as his character tries to maintain both his cool and the discipline needed to get across the pass, all the while just dying to jump on her from the moment he sees her. Running 88 minutes, the film remains fully entertaining whether it is pushing forward with its adventure, or pausing for its characters to get to know one another better amid the beauty of the American wilderness.

The full screen black-and-white picture has no significant flaws and the monophonic sound is okay. There is no captioning.

Tepid casting is the only drawback to **Wild Bill Hickok Rides**, a 1942 western released by Warner Home Video as an *Archive Collection* title (UPC#888574368913, \$22). Constance Bennett is top billed, which sort of underscores the limited amount of faith Warner Bros. had in the drawing power of the Bruce Cabot in the title role, even though he is the hero and the central focus of the trailer that is included on the disc with the film. Howard Da Silva and Ward Bond have effective supporting roles, and Warren William is the mustachioed villain, busily attempting to obtain the property of innocent homesteaders so he can rule the valley economically. Incidentally, there is a pretty, wooden dam at one end of the valley, so you know what's going to happen there before the film is over. Running 82 minutes, the film is a bit dark—good guys die—and is otherwise generally formulaic, but it wouldn't be bad if the hero were played by a more charismatic actor. When he rides into town to avenge a friend's death, a six-gun in each hand, it ought to be thrilling and even iconic, but Cabot is so bland that your heart doesn't even miss a beat. He doesn't just rob the film of its sense of urgency, but in representing a historical figure, he undercuts any sense of mythmaking that ought to supercharge the narrative at hand.

The full screen black-and-white picture is in passable condition. The image looks a little worn at times, but there are no significant flaws. The monophonic sound is okay and there is no captioning.

Cool crime dramas

Three Japanese Nikkatsu Studios crime films from the late Fifties have been gathered onto one Blu-ray platter and two DVD platters in the Arrow Video release, **Nikkatsu Diamond Guys Volume 1** (UPC#76013780-7599, \$50). 'Diamond Guys' was a promotional gimmick by Nikkatsu to link together their films and male stars in the late Fifties and early Sixties. All three films are letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 (two of them in 'Nikkatsuscope'), and all are in Japanese with optional English subtitles. The first two films appear on one of the DVD platters, and the third film appears on the second platter, with special features also split between the two. The presentations on the DVDs look and sound great, but the subliminal improvements that come with the BD delivery make the latter the more compelling choice.

Seijun Suzuki's *Voice without a Shadow*, from 1958, is an excellent and beautifully staged murder thriller. A phone operator, played by Yōko Minamida, overhears a murder and, three years later, recognizes the voice of the murderer during another phone call. Not wishing to spoil the surprises, we won't say much more, but there is a second murder. When the police apprehend a suspect, a dogged reporter played by Hideaki Nitani (who is mistakenly credited with the female role in Arrow's jacket copy) is the only one who trusts the operator when she says the suspect is innocent. It looks gorgeous. The widescreen black-and-white cinematography is spotlessly presented, with crisp contrasts, and is often strikingly conceived. There is a haunting shot of a milkman in the countryside on a bicycle early in the morning (he discovers a dead body), with fog hanging lightly on the roads behind him. As the reporter is struggling with doubts because of his inability to uncover the truth, the film cuts to the neon lights of various Tokyo buildings at night as they flash on and off, underscoring his own emotional state while at the same time reinforcing the 92-minute film's atmosphere of metropolitan corruption. When he finally starts trailing the right suspect, there are more storefront lights and illuminated signs, and not one of them is blinking. For those who are fascinated by the gender and power social dynamics of modern Japan, the subtleties of the give and take of respect and politeness are on constant display, and at several points in the film, the removal of shoes is integral to the advancement of the narrative. The film is also effectively paced, building to an exciting climax, and both the 'good' characters and the 'bad' characters are given complex emotions and conflicted motivations. The sound editing is also quite good and the monophonic sound is crisp.

Dressed in all white, which is Japanese for death, in a steamy port town, the hero of Toshio Masuda's 1958 *Red Pier*, a gangster played by Yujiro Ishihara, has a man killed on the docks, but then falls for the victim's younger sister. In the course of the romance, they are walking one evening during a festival when a car drives by and somebody takes a potshot at him, a 'flesh wound' in the arm. Several other things happen, but in the chronology

of the story, less than a day later, you see him playing pool with his shirtsleeves rolled up, and there's not a mark on his arm, let alone a bandage. We lost respect for the film at that point, and never entirely regained it, even though, later on, there is a witty, western-style showdown between two gangsters that utilizes the complete rectangular frame. Running 99 minutes, the film has a classic mood and the actual betrayals and plot turns are enough to hold one's attention, but ultimately, the psychology of the hero is unpersuasive—he gives up a chance to sneak out of town in order to see the girl again, even though he knows it's a trap—and the film turns out to be all mood and no substance, at least not enough to be worthwhile. The black-and-white presentation looks decent, but it is not as pristine as *Voice without a Shadow*. There are occasional scratches, and a few other, minor instances of wear. The monophonic sound is also a bit squeakier, but the music is terrific.

Speaking of westerns, the opening shot of the Buichi Saito's 1959 *The Rambling Guitarist* is something of a jaw dropper. Beginning with a laconic music theme that sounds more like something that would be underscoring Gene Autry, the hero, played by Akira Koabyashi, is riding in the back of a horse-drawn cart across what looks like prairie, with a mountain in the background. He has a guitar—he soon starts singing the opening number—and a leather jacket, and when the cart drops him off, he steps into the cosmopolitan world of gangsters (and, more specifically, the same city street sets used in *Voice without a Shadow*), as the music itself transitions from hick to hip. The film is in color, which is a treat, and it seeks to invoke an Elvis movie, or something, with guitar numbers and unconvincing fistfights. The hero gets a job with a gangster who is trying to consolidate his operations, but jealousies intrude and other things get out of hand. Running 77 minutes, the plot is rather incoherent, but it does at least feel like it is going somewhere, and the film's effort to make the hero seem 'cool' are a kick. The source material is in good shape and the hues are fresh. The sound is reasonably strong and clear.

Promotional materials for all three films are presented in still frame, as well as trailers for all three movies, and a 25-minute overview of Nikkatsu Studios' youth movies and their stars.

Energizing Blade

After an elaborate opening battle, the 1993 martial arts feature directed by Sammo Hung, **Blade of Fury**, a Warner Home Video *Golden Harvest Warner Archive Collection* title (UPC#888574087036, \$22), jumps ahead in time and settles in for a series of simpler fist and sword conflicts. The battle's one survivor opens a martial arts school in the capital, and tries to stay under the radar, but eventually gets drawn into the corruption and rebellion in the palace. The wirework is almost specifically 1993, wilder than it is in earlier films, but less finessed than it is in later features. Nevertheless, while the plot may be difficult to follow at first, sorting out who is who and what they all want, the fights are lively and imaginative, and the 105-minute feature remains stimulating and energizing from beginning to end. Te Lung stars, with Yang Fan and Cynthia Khan, and Hung also has a supporting role. There are also a few spritzes of blood here and there, and quite a few decapitations, in case you're interested. On the other hand, there doesn't appear to have been an ASPCA representative around, as horses are made to do a couple of harrowing stunts (one bursts through a brick wall), and several other animals don't fare all that well, either.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. There is some brief damage in a couple of spots, and the color designs are not as luscious as many of the martial arts films are these days (Hung just doesn't seem to have an eye for it—there is a shot of a red umbrella in the snow, for example, that does not work the way it is supposed to), but otherwise the image is solid and reasonably fresh. The monophonic sound is adequate and the music is free of distortion. The film is in Chinese. Like all of Warner's Golden Harvest releases, the optional English subtitles are actually captions, announcing things like music cues and ignoring signs or other written information.

Friendship

From a non-crime novel by Ruth Rendell, Francois Ozon's **The New Girlfriend**, released on Blu-ray by Cohen Media and eOne (UPC#741-952800491, \$35), retains the twists and shocks that Rendell is so skilled at applying to her narrative, even though the story is essentially a lighthearted tale about friendship and love. It is also about something else, but to say much of anything would be to spoil that wonderful surprise that occurs during the movie's first act. The remainder of the 108-minute feature is, in effect, an exploration of that surprise and how it impacts the emotions, the maturation and the fates of the characters. Anaïs Demoustier stars, her character suffering from acute depression after her best friend dies, until she looks into helping with the care of the friend's newborn baby. Raphaël Personnaz plays her husband and Romain Duris plays the friend's husband. For a while, the film is a joyful delight, as the viewer is drawn by the heroine's perspective through a progress of discovery and enlightenment. The film also has a pleasing eroticism woven into the other events of the narrative. Near the conclusion, in order to facilitate an ending to the story, one of the characters is rendered comatose. While the device is required to bring things to a climax, it doesn't entirely fit with the realism and simplicity that makes the rest of the movie so effective, but by that point, either the 2014 movie has won you over already, or it never will.