

### Blu Grapes

Gregg Toland's captivating black-and-white cinematography looked terrific on the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Home Entertainment DVD release of John Ford's **The Grapes of Wrath** (May 04), but it looks even better on Fox's Blu-ray (UPC#024543773160, \$20). The incredibly delicate layers of greys and blacks are more distinctly defined on every frame. The full screen image is free of wear, and yet still communicates a sense of the downtrodden, subliminally, in its avoidance of gloss or sheen. (And quick, how many crosses can you count in the opening shot? We can see at least two dozen.) The monophonic sound is stronger than it was on the DVD, but it also has a fair amount of background noise and is best kept at a moderate volume. As with the DVD, Fox offers an option to play the film with a pair of explanatory opening title cards—pushing the 129-minute running time up another minute—which talk about the Dust Bowl, although what we realized this time through is that the film was actually about agribusiness taking advantage of the Dust Bowl with advanced technology to clear out sharecropper farming so the land could be worked on a more efficient, factory-like scale. The sharecroppers move to California, only to find that they can only become cogs in another machine of the agribusiness there, as the days of working their own land anywhere recede to the distant past.

The commentary by Joseph McBride and Susan Shillinglaw is carried over from the DVD, as is the *Biography* episode on producer Darryl F. Zanuck, the trailer and the 8 minutes of newsreels. There are alternate French, Spanish, Castilian, Italian and German audio tracks, and twelve subtitling options, including English. The only new special feature is a 25-minute retrospective documentary originally conceived as a *Fox Legacy* episode for television, which has an off-putting, lecture-like format, but does provide a workable context for appreciating the film.

### Grier vehicle

A Pam Grier blaxploitation vehicle shot in Chicago and (mostly) Louisville, **Sheba, Baby**, has been released on Blu-ray & DVD by Arrow Video (UPC#760137818793, \$30). Grier is a former Louisville cop, working as a private detective, who comes back home when her father's storefront loan business is being pressured to sell out by gangsters. Tragedy ensues, and Grier's character works her way up the organization's hierarchy to get her revenge. Grier's outfits look terrific and she remains telegenic regardless of how messy her hair gets. The 1975 American-International Pictures feature also has a suitably hip musical score, and a few busy action scenes. Everything else about the film is utterly inept, but there is some sort of cultural double standard that makes it fully enjoyable anyway, as if the pedestrian acting (some of the performances would not be out of place in vaudeville), badly framed shots, illogical plot, deadening dialog and bland pacing make no difference whatsoever in the compelling nature of the film's artistry. Is it the embrace of the African-American sociological perspective on the standard urban thriller dynamic, or is it that the radiance of Grier's presence is so bright it outshines any flaws? In any case, as bad as the 90-minute feature may be, it is still utterly engaging from beginning to end, no matter how many times it is played.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The colors are very fresh and sharp, which add significantly to the appeal of Grier in her various outfits, and to a few of the shinier cars, although the cinematography has grain, problematic contrasts and other impurities. The monophonic sound has a limited range, but within that range it is free of distortion and reasonably strong. There are optional English subtitles, a few promotional materials in still frame, a trailer that contains some alternate shots and line readings, a 15-minute interview with producer David Sheldon (who also wrote the original story and collaborated on the screenplay), and a decent 12-minute summary of Grier's career.

The film also has two terrific commentaries. One is an interview with Sheldon by film critic Nathaniel Thompson. They reference what is occurring on the screen a couple of times, and certainly talk quite a bit about how the film was conceived and shot (he was on the set every day), and about the other personnel, but they also talk quite a bit about Sheldon's career at AIP and the fascinating business of bargain basement filmmaking. There is also very little in the 15-minute interview that isn't in the commentary.

The second commentary is by a fan of director William Girdler, Patty Breen, who created a web site about Girdler, knows the film on an almost frame-by-frame basis, and shares everything she knows about the film's creation and its artistry, or lack thereof, since she never hesitates to point out an ambiguity or outright flaw. "I really think that part of what makes **Sheba, Baby** hard to sit through for a lot of people is the level of discomfort the actors exhibit on screen, and a lot of their visible discomfort is because they don't seem to have enough to do and they're trying to inflate tiny pieces of rote dialog into high drama." She also talks about Girdler's links to Louisville, where he made many of his films, and about how the film still resonates with the local populace. "I stood next to this very fountain in Louisville, one hot, sticky Friday afternoon in summertime. I had a camera with me, and I filmed several impromptu, man-on-the-street interviews with passersby. I asked if they knew a movie had been filmed at that spot. You

know what? Every person responded the same way. 'You mean that Pam Grier movie?' Really, that's how enduring this film is. It's still remembered and it is still 'the' Louisville movie."

A DVD included in the set is essentially indistinguishable from the BD (the music isn't quite as crisp), and has the same special features. MGM Home Entertainment released the film previously on DVD (UPC#02761-6857880). Colors are deeper and there is less grain on the Arrow release, although MGM's presentation has slightly lighter contrasts that bring more details out of the shadows and the fleshtones. The sound is also a little softer. MGM's presentation has the same letterboxing, with an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback, English captioning, optional French and Spanish subtitles, and the trailer.

### MacLean adventure

It ought to be just another mindless and even tiresome action film, but the 1971 **When Eight Bells Toll**, produced by Rank Film Distributors and released on Blu-ray by Kino Lorber Incorporated (UPC#738329203665, \$30), has two things going for it, or perhaps three, that held us in rapt attention from beginning to end. Firstly, while the film was unimaginatively directed by Etienne Perier (although, a fourth factor—a couple of the stunts are well executed), Alastair MacLean wrote both the source novel and the screenplay (perhaps in tandem?), so there are consistently engaging plot twists. Sure, you have a general idea of who the good guys and the bad guys are, and what they are after, but there are just enough little surprises along the way to keep you wondering what will happen next. And secondly, the film stars Anthony Hopkins as a British naval intelligence agent, and Robert Morley as his boss. Can you just imagine what it is like having the two of them on the screen at the same time? Perhaps because MacLean gives him enough to work with, he's on good footing to begin with, but Morley's constant inventiveness is an utter delight, and raises the film's quality at least two or three notches all on his own. Initially, since he's the boss, you think that he's only going to be in the scenes in the office at the beginning, which would be typical of his casting in other films, but then there's another MacLean surprise and he's in the movie for almost all of its 94 minutes. Hopkins is so young you don't even recognize him at first, in his wetsuit, running around an abandoned freighter, and his character is a typical bland, coldhearted MacLean protagonist, but not only does he bring a touch of bemusement to his lot as an actor, being cast as a heroic secret agent and such, you can also see him learning from the master in the scenes he shares with Morley. He does not take on Morley's affectations, but he clearly loosens as they work together, and you can see Hopkins processing what Morley is up to in his eyes.

The third thing? The film was shot in Northern Scotland, with dreary overcast skies that are ideal for a tale of intrigue. The villains are hijacking gold shipments and somehow transferring the bullion off the ships with no one being the wiser. It is up to the heroes to figure out how this is being accomplished and to break up the gang. Nathalie Delon, Jack Hawkins and Corin Redgrave co-star.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. Throughout the presentation, the image teeters on graininess and a loss of contrast, but it is just stable enough to be acceptable and never distracts you from the entertainment unless you are actively looking for flaws. Generally, the hues are fresh. The monophonic sound is also a bit rough in places and is best kept at a modest volume, but while Walter Scott's musical score is a little overbearing, the editing and power of the sound effects are fairly engaging, particularly during the underwater fight and the final shootout. There is no captioning, and a trailer is included.

### Africa adventures

Two films of international intrigue from the early Sixties, set in Africa, have been released as on Blu-ray as a *Double Feature* by Blue Underground, **Code 7...Victim 5/Mozambique** (UPC#827058705899, \$30; the actual title card on the first film says, 'Code 7 Victim 5!,' though for the life of us, even after watching the film, we have no idea what either version of the title means). Both movies were produced in 1964 by Harry Alan Towers and directed by Robert Lynn, with simplistic but era-appealing musical scores by Johnny Douglas, and both have essentially the same narrative structure. They open with a murder, the hero is brought from a great distance to be employed by people who are in the center of the crime investigation, and falls in love, or, at least, hooks up, with a local girl while everything else is going on. There are car chases, more murders and so on, and the hero's life is often threatened. In the end, he chases the villain to a precipice, where the villain falls from an extreme height. But there are also enough differences to make the films a tolerable double bill.

Lex Barker stars as an American private eye in *Code 7...Victim 5*, called to Cape Town by a wealthy copper miner to look into the murder of his partner. As he tracks down the history of his employer's associates, several are killed just as he begins to talk to them, and he is involved in a couple of harrowing car chases. Running 88 minutes, the film visits practically every tourist attraction Cape Town has, an excursion that is effectively augmented by Nicolas Roeg's cinematography. As for the mystery, there are plenty of suspects and logical reasons for most of the deaths, but there are also plenty of