

Who do we appreciate?

For a brief, glorious period in the early Seventies, the motion picture genre known as cheerleader films bloomed but for a few precious years before disappearing again, spawning, among other things, one of the most famous X-rated films ever made, and, in the more common R-rated selections, usually a happy mix of smart and willing females helping stronger and dumber guys overcome the forces of corruption among their elders. It is commonly understood, and with good reason, that the best of these films was Jack Hill's 1974 **The Swinging Cheerleaders**, which has been released by Arrow Video as a *Blu-ray + DVD* (UPC#760137874195, \$35). Jo Johnston, Colleen Camp, Rainbeaux Smith, and Rosanne Katon star, and since the film is set at a college and not a high school, they look age appropriate. Johnston plays a journalism major who goes undercover to get the scoop on the girls, but befriends them while stumbling across a more insidious point shaving scheme. The nudity is marvelous, but there is also legitimate romance, and there is a real emotional dilemma when the other girls learn what Johnston's character was originally planning. Running 91 minutes, the finale has some fairly loose slapstick and mild suspense, but the cast is appealing and the film is basically no more than a solidly delivered effort within its genre, albeit a genre that did not last long enough to generate much greater competition.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.66:1. The cinematography may have been lit on the fly, but the color transfer looks very fresh and the image is sharp. Due to the nature of the film, the DVD included in the set is equally satisfying, and has the same special features. The monophonic sound is fairly strong, and there are optional English subtitles, a couple of TV commercials, two good archival interviews with Hill running a total of 19 minutes, and a nice 10-minute interview with the late cinematographer, Alfred Taylor. The best supplement, however, is a wonderful 2007 appearance by Hill, Camp and Katon (Smith had passed away and Johnston only made the one movie before dropping out of the business) at a celebratory screening of the film. The two actresses look terrific, have wonderful stories about the movie and their subsequent careers, and the entire segment had us grinning from beginning to end.

Hill also provides a commentary track, prompted by cult film documentary director Elijah Drenner. They talk about how the film was shot (Hill preferred working in a studio, which he felt was cheaper than the hassle of going on locations; for street scenes he just went outside and around the block), the cast and crew members and what has happened to them since, the film's genre idiosyncrasies ("We had some conflict. [The producer] wanted really, really short skirts and I thought that short skirts were kind of counter-productive in something like this. But the wardrobe designer designed these low-cut [tops] and when she took her designs to the manufacturer, who was supposed to make the costumes, he said, 'For what school is this?'"), the contrast within the film's *mise en scene* and today's 'consensual' complexities, and his fond memories of the production as a whole. "I must say that out of all the movies I made, this one was the most fun, in the sense that it was kind of Murphy's Law in reverse. Everything that could possibly go well went well. Never any delays. Everybody knew just what to do. Everybody had a lot of fun in this movie, and I think that's what shows on the screen."

It's Vacation season

Only one test is necessary to judge a comedy—does it make you laugh?—and by the conditions of that test, the Warner Home Video release, **Vacation** (UPC#883929457434, \$19), is a total success. The slapstick, character humor and absurdist punctuations are plentiful, are linked by a coherent narrative, and are supported by a generally benign premise. There is hardly anything that is alienating about the 2015 feature, and plenty that is amusing. The one problem is that the film is a direct sequel to the original **National Lampoon's Vacation**, which is also available from Warner as a *30th Anniversary Blu-ray* (UPC#883929299034, \$13). That 1983 film, feeding a hunger for more movies like *Animal House* and more films from *Saturday Night Live* cast members, was a blockbuster, and this *Vacation* cannot possibly achieve the memories of humor (not necessarily the real humor, just the nostalgic memory for it—the movie itself even makes a direct meta-joke about that) the previous film represents. Hence, it was considered a failure, but it by no means is one.

Ed Helms stars as a commercial pilot who wants to take his family on a similar vacation to the one—depicted in the earlier film—he went on as a child. Christina Applegate plays his wife, and Chevy Chase and Beverly D'Angelo have an extended cameo when the family stops off at the grandparents' house. They have two sons, and one of the film's consistently funny gags is that the younger son utterly dominates the older one, like a Chihuahua terrorizing a shepherd. They go on their trip, many disastrous incidents occur, and they bond a little tiny bit from the experience. The film runs 99 minutes.

The film has also been issued as a *Blu-ray + DVD + Digital HD* (UPC#883929457748, \$20), with more special features, which is the only real reason to consider it, although the best feature, 12 minutes of fully amusing deleted scenes, appears on both. If the picture quality is a little sharper on the BD, and the 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound is a little stronger, that hardly matters. There is an audio track that describes the action ("Rusty drives as everyone else sleeps. He looks out his window to see a smoking hot blonde driving a red convertible in the next lane. She smiles at him flirtatiously.

Rusty points to himself quizzically. She seductively waves. He waves back, then playfully points to his wedding ring. She shrugs, then continues flirting. Rusty nods with her. She blows a kiss. He catches it, then gives a salute. She keeps flirting. Rusty smiles bashfully. He looks away as she changes lanes to the left. She moves into oncoming traffic, and a huge semi-truck demolishes her."), alternate French and Spanish audio tracks, optional English, French and Spanish subtitles, and a 2-minute tourism plug for the state of Georgia, where the film was shot. In addition to that, the BD has Portuguese audio and subtitles tracks, a 2-minute blooper reel with a couple of choice moments, and 28 minutes of promotional featurettes that include a lot of Chase and D'Angelo.

We reviewed a full screen presentation of **National Lampoon's Vacation** in Sep 97 (one advantage—there is more to see of D'Angelo's first topless scene, since the top and bottom of the image are masked on the letterboxed versions). The picture was quite grainy, however, and colors were a bit weak. That was improved with Warner's release of **National Lampoon's Vacation 20th Anniversary Special Edition** (UPC#08539275-3529, \$8). Although, as we mentioned, the 1.85:1 letterboxing took picture information off the top and bottom of the image and added just a touch to the sides, the colors are stronger and smoother. The image is still a bit soft, but it is presentable, except on very large screens. The monophonic sound is unchanged. There are alternate French, Spanish and Portuguese audio tracks, optional English, French, Spanish and Portuguese subtitles, a trailer, an interactive 'game' that features brief clips and retrospective interviews with members of the cast, along with clips from the film, a minute-long 'introduction' with Chase and co-star Randy Quaid, and a good commentary track with Chase, D'Angelo, director Harold Ramis, co-star Anthony Michael Hall, producer Matty Simmons and others, talking about their experiences during the shoot (unlike the remake, they shot in several locales across the country), the comedic inventiveness of the cast members, the script (Ramis is embarrassed now by the St. Louis inner city sequence), and the changes that were made (the first ending tanked with test audiences, and they came up with a better one, although Hall grew about six inches between shooting the two).

The BD has a stronger audio track, but the picture transfer is the same as before and looks fairly soft. The BD has a German audio track and two types of Spanish audio tracks, and nine subtitling options, including English. The trailer, introduction and commentary are carried over from the DVD, and additionally, there is a new retrospective documentary, running 85 minutes. Footage from the interactive segment on the DVD is incorporated, along with behind-the-scenes material and many reminiscences. Irritatingly, the free-flowing curse words in the interviews have been bleeped out. Nevertheless, it is a reasonably thorough telling of the film's creation and what has happened to its participants. They also manage to squeeze in a quick promo for the updated sequel.

Divergent installment

Much to our relief, **The Divergent Series: Allegiant**, released by Summit Entertainment (UPC#031398245827, \$30), turns out not to be the flop everyone suggested it was. The third installment in the enjoyable sci-fi action series, the film introduces fresh components while continuing the same premise as the previous films (Sep 14, Mar 16). Set in a futuristic, walled-off Chicago, the film picks up after the heroine, played by Shailene Woodley, has successfully overthrown the city's corrupt government. Unfortunately, the factions that had united to enable the overthrow fall into a civil war, while the heroine journeys beyond the wall to confront the people controlling her city's isolation. The film is no artistic masterpiece, but it has a stimulating futurism, involving and exciting action scenes, a decent sense of humor, and a continuation of the same characters that have already established their appeal (and villainy) in the previous films. The story, which is also a setup for the final installment (unless, if current unsettling rumors are true, they turn it into a TV series), is easy to follow, and yet still contains a few interesting concepts and possibilities. There are no spectacular effect sequences as there were in the earlier features, but there are plenty of small touches. Why the film has not been embraced with the same enthusiasm as its predecessors is baffling.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The color transfer looks fine, even though there is a problematic 'red' landscape that was difficult to pull off. The 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound has many directional effects and a decent punch. There is an audio track that describes the action ("She gazes up at him. His eyes grow intense and he presses his lips to hers."), an alternate Spanish track, optional English and Spanish subtitles, and a pair of decent promotional featurettes running a total of 9 minutes.

The series producers, Douglas Wick and Lucy Fisher, provide a commentary as they have with the other installments, although it is of limited interest. They talk about shooting in Atlanta, working with the cast, and finding a way to break the novel into this film and whatever comes next, but there are gaps in the talk and usually just reactions to what is happening on the screen. "Now watch this scene with these three actors in this craft. This was a really long day of shooting and they were against a giant outdoor blue screen on a little part of the craft and every time you see them jerking up and down, the crane would be shaking them, and they're pretty high up in the air. So they had to be 'shaken' for much of the day. It was incredibly hot outside and if they wanted to come down to have a bathroom break or a water break,