



QUEUED UP BY BRYAN REESMAN

HIDDEN FIGURES (2016)

The set-up: As America falls behind the Russians in the Space Race of the early 1960s, three African-American women—genius human computer Katherine Goble (targeting trajectories for major flight missions), untitled but masterly computer supervisor Dorothy Vaughn, and smart aspiring engineer Mary Jackson—labor hard at NASA to assist the agency's missions, including helping John Glenn to become the first American to orbit the Earth. On top of their intense number crunching, the women must also combat the racism and sexism that blocks their ascension up the ranks.

The breakdown: While these real-life events seemed like a slam dunk for Hollywood, it took decades for these stories to be discovered and turned into an insightful and moving film. Sure, it offers tailor made uplifting moments on screen, but director and co-screenwriter Theodore Melfi balances them with the unpleasant societal realities for black women at the time. His passion for these pioneers and their life stories shines through; he even turned down helming the next *Spider-Man* movie to make this. Stars Taraji P. Henson (Katherine Goble), Octavia Spencer (Dorothy Vaughn), and Janelle Monáe (Mary Jackson)



deliver bravura performances, while Kevin Costner and Jim Parsons' characters tussle over race and gender in the workplace. It's nice to know that 98-year-old Goble (now Johnson) and Vaughn got to see their story on the screen. They recall their experiences in the bonus documentary.

A MONSTER CALLS (2016)

The set-up: Twelve-year-old Conor O'Malley (Lewis MacDougall) lives a hard life. He's being bullied daily at school, his father now lives in Los Angeles, and his single mother (Felicity Jones) is battling cancer, which means he may have to live with his stern grandmother (Sigourney Weaver). Drawn into despair, the imaginative youngster/artist unintentionally summons a tree monster (voiced by Liam Neeson) that arrives past midnight many nights to tell him dark fairy tales he does not immediately comprehend. Conor seeks a savior for his mother; the

monster wants to make him face the demons in his life and the ultimate truth he does not want to concede.

The breakdown: Adapted by Patrick Ness from his novel and directed by J.A. Bayona (*The Orphanage*), *A Monster Calls* is a wonderfully unsentimental look at a troubled childhood and a family traumatized by the ravages of cancer. It's that rare modern CGI film loaded with FX (and some great animated sequences) that can justify the usage, and the performances are wonderful. At a time when animated movies are filled with



cutesy animals (enough already), and family friendly flicks indulge in saccharine positivity, *A Monster Calls* takes a higher road and acknowledges that for many children life isn't always peachy, the road is not always easy, and coping with life altering changes requires tremendous bravery.

THE HANDMAID'S TALE (1990)

The set-up: In a futuristic dystopian country, pollution has rendered most women infertile, so the remaining child bearers are enslaved into the service of rich families desiring offspring. Seized by the regime that has killed her husband and assigned her daughter to a new family, a young woman named Kate (Natasha Richardson) uncomfortably cozies up to the older couple (Robert Duvall and Faye Dunaway) who require her body for their purposes...and his lust. (If she fails to get pregnant, she could be banished to a terrible existence.) As Kate falls for their security guard (Aidan Quinn), she plots a way

out of her hellish new existence which indoctrinates women, changes their names, and makes them feel shame for challenging the patriarchal system that oppresses them.

The breakdown: Adapted from Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel by acclaimed playwright Harold Pinter, Volker Schlöndorff's film is as gripping and disturbing today as it was over 25 years ago, and given the assault on women's rights by the right wing in America now, more important than ever. This is one of those prescient stories that may have seemed far-fetched to some at the time of its release but which



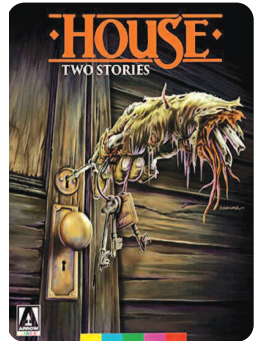
echoes some truly backward thinking today. Then again, it was written and filmed during the Reagan/Bush years when the backlash against feminism swelled. Hulu has a 10-part series inspired by Atwood's tale which starts airing on the 26th. It will be interesting to see how it expands on the material.

HOUSE: Two Stories (1986-7)

The set-up: The first two installments of this four-film franchise chronicle kooky and spooky goings-on at two different suburban abodes. In the first, a Vietnam vet turned novelist (William Katt) tries to write about his wartime experiences while living at the house where his aunt killed herself and his son mysteriously disappeared. He soon becomes plagued by the ghosts and goblins that drove her to the edge. With the help of a nosy neighbor/fan (*Cheers*' George Wendt) he takes on the creepy critters to uncover the mysteries of the estate. In the sequel *House II: The Second Story*, a young man (Arye Gross) inherits a family mansion and discovers, after resurrecting his great-great-grandfather from the local cemetery, that it is constructed around a Mayan temple with portals to past

realities. An enchanted crystal skull with life-rejuvenating properties is in Gramps' possession, and it lures his zombified, gun-slinging nemesis from the past, which leads to a supernatural showdown.

The breakdown: These fun, quirky cult movies were unusual attempts to cross the horror and comedy genres without the excessively bloody splatstick of series like *The Evil Dead*. The Steve Miner-directed original is the best one, a fun brew of laughs and scares that features Richard Moll as a crazed solider who has left a mark on the novelist's psyche. The goofy sequel, directed by *House* writer Ethan Wiley, takes a crazier turn by tossing in dinosaurs, a zombie horse, and a caterpuppy. Bill Maher serves up smarmy comedic support, and John



Ratzenberger steals the show as an interdimensional warrior posing as an ordinary electrician. Devotees of both movies will be pleased with the fresh HD transfers, hour-long docs on both, and in this limited edition box a 150-page hardcover book by Simon Barber called *The House Companion* featuring photos, images (Marvel did a *House II* comic?!), original press materials, and even chapters on *House III* and *IV*. Kudos to Arrow for another killer set.

THE WANDERERS (1979)

The set-up: Led by the dashing Richie Gennaro (Ken Wahl), the Italian high school gang The Wanderers try to carve out their turf in the rough 'n' tumble Bronx of 1963, fending off truly dangerous threats like the Fordham Baldies and an insane Irish clan called the Ducky Boys that simply seek to take down anyone in their way. Interspersed through the showdowns and youthful shenanigans (set mostly to '50s rock and doo-wop tunes) are life slices that include romantic squabbles, parental disputes, local mafia entanglements, and a struggle to overcome the existential sinkhole that is their 'hood.

The breakdown: *The Wanderers*

is a lost American gem that, while not as viciously violent as gang films of that era like *The Warriors*, is as engaging and vastly underappreciated. Adapted for the screen by Rose and Philip Kaufman from Richard Price's acclaimed novel, Philip Kaufman directed the film with an intensity and stark quality that for the most part imbues it with realism and believability. Kaufman deftly balances stylishness with simplicity and reminds us that "the good old days" were not necessarily so. The superb cast includes Karen Allen (pre-*Raiders Of The Lost Ark*), John Freidrich, Tony Ganos, Alan Rosenberg, and Toni Kalem (*The Sopranos*) and early turns by Olympia



Dukakis and *Seinfeld*'s Wayne Knight (in a bit part). Kino's bonus features include Kaufman commentary and recent roundtables with Kaufman, Price, Allen, Kalem, and others. While the packaging barely announces it, this set includes the original 117-minute theatrical cut and the rarely viewed 124-minute "preview cut". Look on the discs to see which one you want to pick.

THE HOUSE THAT SCREAMED (1970)

The set-up: A young student sent to a boarding school for delinquent teenage girls tangles with a cruel educational hierarchy as student deaths quietly mount up. Adding to the creepiness is a twisted headmistress (Lilli Palmer) exerting strong control over her young teen son, who secretly seduces different girls despite warnings from his mother.

The breakdown: This underrated film, set in late 19th century France, supposedly influenced Dario Argento's colorful and blood-drenched

Suspria seven years later, and it is easy to see why when you take in the sinister school, the creepy matriarch, and the growing sense of dread in the third act. But whereas Argento created a gruesomely dazzling visual tone poem with minimal plotting, director Narciso Ibáñez Serrador stylishly works with Luis Verña's Peñafiel's more structured script, even though there are a couple of glaring plot holes/omissions. No matter—what starts off as a weird psychological drama transforms into a twisted horror tale by the final act with an



ending you won't see coming. The extended cut features some scenes that could not be as nicely restored, and while not essential they help flesh out the story a bit more. Scream Factory also managed to get new interviews with cast members John Moulder-Brown and Mary Maude for this release.