

# THE DVD LASER DISC NEWSLETTER

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## The incredible journey

First off, it is incredibly relaxing to sit through an 86-minute film that doesn't have a single line of dialog or any taxation upon the language center of one's brain, except for the language of cinema. The Oscar winning animated Latvian feature, **Flow**, released in a three-platter Criterion Collection 4K Blu-ray (UPC#715515315012, \$50), depicts a phantasmagorical adventure by a cat and several other animals mostly in a boat after a Biblical-like flood overflows an apparently already vanished civilization—the buildings left standing are sort of a blend of Old Europe and older Southeast Asia. One of the movie's dozen plus opening logos has the temerity to include spoken words in its brief display—which must have irritated the artists making the film to no end—but thereafter, it is all just purrs, barking, bird calls and so on, augmented by the wind, rain, other environmental noises and a nondescript musical score. There is a subtitling option that describes the audio track, just as there is an alternate audio track that describes the action ("The boat glides along against a backdrop of green mountains with rolling, textured terrain. Bird sits in the boat, sleeping. Cat works the tiller with its front paws, standing on the seat with its hind legs. The boat rocks violently as it hits a stone railing. It continues ahead, past the partly submerged railing. Bird shoots a look at Cat and takes control of the tiller."), but with those two options inactivated a viewer can spend the visually stimulating adventure in a blissful solitude that burrows past cerebral language barriers to make contact with a primal enthusiasm for characters, narrative and existence.

Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2:1, the environments—mostly woodlands between the vestiges of a former civilization, and water—are often photo realistic, while the animals are less detailed. Rather than intricate fur, the cat, for example, has a generalized dark coat that breaks into differently shaded strips in close-ups on a large screen. On a smaller screen, and particularly with the presentation on the standard Blu-ray included in the set, it is less distracting, but you lose the sense of immersion that a larger screen and the detailed 4K playback provide. With the 7.1-channel DTS sound and the film's stunning blend of natural and surreal images, the 4K presentation is not only a transcendent journey, but one that is highly tempting to revisit whenever the bombardments of real civilization become too overwhelming.

The film's creator and director, Gints Zilbalodis, supplies an informative commentary track, explaining how various sequences were initially conceived and then executed, discussing his strategy for the film as a whole, and sharing other information about the production, which was created by a very small team of collaborators. "Our budget was fairly limited so we could only afford to design and create the assets that we see in the frame, so we tried to put every cent of the budget on the screen. The way I designed the scenes is I just roughed them out with basic shapes and designed the camera. Once that is figured out, we only put the detail where it's really noticeable from the camera's point of view, so if you would look around within these scenes, the parts of the set that are outside of the frame look quite broken and unfinished." While he does comment upon specific moments within the narrative, he is more catty, as it were, talking about the story as a whole. "I always get asked about what happens and what's the explanation, but like even when I was making it, I wasn't really able to articulate it. I had the piece of music and it felt right, it felt like there was a strong emotion. It's impossible to convey this experience with words. Maybe you could adapt it into something, but that's the reason why I make films, is to express things I can't with words."

Also included on the 4K platter is a 2019 animated feature that Zilbalodis created entirely by himself, *Away*. Running 75 minutes, it begins with a young man in a parachute, caught in a tree in an otherwise barren landscape. A giant frees him, and as he makes his way to a grotto by the sea, the giant follows him but does not enter the grotto. He finds a map and a motorcycle, and realizes he must journey to the other end of the island he is on to find civilization, so he rides off, following the pathway indicated by the map. A little bird joins him, and the giant begins following him once more. Again, the film, which is both relaxing and intriguing, has no dialog whatsoever, just sound effects, animal noises, the motorcycle's engine and music. The artwork is limited in its scope of design, but not in its imagination, with the boy crossing

many different landscapes and encountering different animals and topographical challenges. There is not one moment in the program that is not utterly transfixing. The immediacy and realness of **Flow** is startling, and of course *Away* cannot equal that, in either its backgrounds or its foregrounds and creatures, but the animation is always serviceable and in terms of pure narrative, *Away* is nearly as good. While the personalities of the animals and the hero are not as intricately constructed, there is a consistent effort to give every creature depicted a recognizable soul. The basic momentum of the plot carries you right along, and the two films make an excellent double bill.

In a travesty of design, while **Flow** starts up where it left off if playback is interrupted, *Away* does not. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. Colors are bright and sharp. The artwork may be limited in detail, but the image is otherwise in excellent condition, which perhaps adds to the viewer's willingness to be mesmerized by its unfolding. There are no subtitling options. The stereo sound has a workable dimensionality, adding to the film's ethereal presence.

The first standard Blu-ray platter is a replication of the 4K platter. The second standard BD platter is filled with supplemental features, none of which begin where they left off if playback is terminated. There is an excellent 13-minute introduction by Zilbalodis ("We did watch a lot of cat videos and dog videos and luckily, for almost every type of movement imaginable, you can find some reference, and we would film our own pets, as well."); a charming 11-minute talk by producer Mafiss Kaza who describes collaborating with Zilbalodis, overseeing the project (he says it took 5½ years to make) and the reactions and awards the film received; a 60-minute Latvian television documentary about the making of the film, including how it was funded, terrific interviews profiling the various animators and their specific assignments, the film's sound design, and more on its awards and world-wide reception; two minute-long teasers intended to showcase the film's animation potential; a partially silent rough draft version of the film (with reasonably detailed animation) running a full 81 minutes; five trailers; and 10 minutes of interesting unused sequences narrated by Zilbalodis.

Two of Zilbalodis' short films, both of which he created entirely by himself, are also included, and each is also accompanied by his commentary. *Aqua*, from 2012, is kind of a warm up for **Flow**, running 8 minutes and filled with impressionistic images of a cat, often in water ("Technically, it's quite rough, but for filmmakers who are starting out, I think you should not be too worried about making things perfect. If it makes sense emotionally and if there's a strong idea underneath, people will forgive you."). *Priorities*, from 2014, running 9 minutes, is a very entertaining warm up for *Away*, about a man and his dog who are stranded on an island after their plane crashes ("The water is way more simple than what we ended up using in **Flow**. It wasn't that important to be realistic. In CG animation, you can get all the information, but then it can be too much, so I'm just trying to focus on things that are important in that moment.").

## Which Carter to get

Three different releases of Mike Hodges' excellent 1971 MGM revenge thriller, **Get Carter**, have appeared simultaneously on Blu-ray through Warner Bros., a reissued Warner Bros. Home Entertainment Blu-ray (UPC#883929839292, \$20), a remastered Warner Bros. *Warner WB Archive Collection* Blu-ray (UPC#840418334980, \$25) and a Warner Bros. *Warner WB Archive Collection* two-platter 4K Blu-ray (UPC#840418334645, \$30), which also includes a copy of the remastered standard Blu-ray platter. The reissued Blu-ray is an upgrade to the Warner DVD we reviewed in Nov 00. Now the film is set in Newcastle, England, and is deliberately (and wonderfully) drab, dreary and nihilistic. The image is always going to be hazy, with pale fleshtones and dark, ill-lit corners, because that is the movie's intention, to reflect life's less flattering aspects. In counterpoint, a reflection of life's most flattering aspects, Michael Caine is the star, playing a London hood who returns to his hometown when his brother is killed and starts looking into the death. The film is based upon a novel by Ted Lewis entitled *Jack's Return Home*.

### Carter (Continued)

Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1, the DVD was murky, but workable, and the reissued BD adds solidity to its image and strength to its monophonic sound. The remastered BD is an improvement upon that. The image has a little more detail and color while sustaining the gloomy atmosphere, and the sound is crisper and stronger. The colors on the standard remastered BD are actually a touch brighter than the colors on the 4K presentation, but the 4K presentation has a greater smoothness and finer detail, and its sound has an even crisper and sharper presence, adding to the impact of both the many environmental sound effects and Roy Budd's excellent jazz musical score. The 4K improvements are mostly subliminal, but they essentially enhance the invitation the 112-minute film is extending to enter the world that Caine's character is entering, while at the same time aiding the concentration required to keep track of the characters and their schemes. The film's exhilarating action scenes feel even livelier, the interludes Caine's character has with various female characters are more titillating, and the entire film's grown up, escapist spirit is more irresistible.

The reissued BD has the same special features that were on the DVD, including a 4-minute clip of Budd performing the score, two trailers and a good commentary track intercutting reminiscences from Caine, Hodges and cinematographer Wolfgang Suschinsky. The isolated musical score on the DVD has not been carried over. There are two alternate Spanish audio tracks and optional English, French and Spanish subtitles.

The remastered BD and 4K BD have optional English subtitles but no other language choices. One of the trailers is identical to the one issued before, but the second trailer is new. The filmmaker commentary and Budd clip are also carried over. Fresh features include two sweet introductions by Caine (recorded a half-century apart) running a total of 3 minutes; a really good 24-minute reminiscence by producer Michael Klinger's son, Tony Klinger, who has some nice stories about how his father got into the business (through the porn market), how he got **Carter** and what happened after he did; a very nice 22-minute interview with costar Petra Markham talking about her career and being typecast for a very long time as a teenager, and speaking in detail about her scenes; a 17-minute discussion of Webb's music, its releases as a recordings and Webb's career; and a great 60-minute interview with Hodges in front of a live audience in which he talks about his entire career.

Finally, there is a wonderful commentary by British film experts Kim Newman and Barry Forshaw, who supply a running appreciation of the film as they go over the careers of those involved, talk about how the film's stature has risen over the years, analyze the plot and otherwise supply a continual string of insightful observations and connections, always with an erudite enthusiasm and humor.

"Do you consider this the best of all the British gangster movies?"

"It's certainly the one I go back to the most often. There's this paradox. It is an utterly bleak vision of Hell, and yet it's also kind of comfort viewing. It is also something I find so immensely pleasurable to revisit that I'm not sure what that says about me, let alone about Britain."

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The following year, suggesting that the one film may have been in some sort of pre-production before the other was released, MGM made a second movie based upon the same Lewis book, this time as a Blaxploitation feature, **Hit Man**, which is also available as another Warner *Archive Collection* Blu-ray (UPC#84041832-3700, \$24). Written and directed by George Armitage, Bernie Casey has the Caine part, with Pam Grier in second billing as one of the several women that he has interludes with along the way. Because of the 1972 film's source, it is one of the dramatically richer Blaxploitation features, and that is its greatest appeal, that there is depth to the characters and heart in their exchanges amid the trappings of jive talk and unrestrained nudity and violence. The film follows the **Get Carter** plot quite closely, except for its fairly satisfying alteration at the end, which, all things considered, doesn't change its nihilism an iota. Although technically the locations ought to have been reversed, the film is set in Los Angeles, with Casey's character arriving from Oakland to investigate the death of his brother. The oversized Casey, who literally has to bend down to get through several doorways, did not hold onto a leading man appeal for long, but he is ideal for the film, believably intimidating the crooks and hustlers he has to awkwardly sort through, while standing out as the guy the women all want to get their hands on. Running 91 minutes, the film does not have the regular action beats that such movies usually felt obligated to include (the trailer on the disc takes almost all of its footage from the movie's finale), but its array of characters, early Seventies atmosphere and culture, and narrative momentum are sufficient compensation until things get hotter.

Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1, the picture on the DVD we reviewed in Aug 10 was already in decent condition all things considered, since the cinematography itself has the same sort of soft, murky look that was necessary to convey urban moral decay. The Blu-ray is still an improvement, however, with much sharper detail and more intricate hues. The monophonic sound is also noticeably fuller and sharper, and H.B. Barnum's music is the film's one component that unquestionably achieves full parity with **Get Carter**. There are optional English subtitles, which come in as handy for Compton as they do for Newcastle.

### 4K Superman

A reboot that doesn't bother with origin stories or other falderal, James Gunn's 2025 Warner Bros. DC Studios **Superman**, released as a 4K *UltraHD* Blu-ray by WB, DC and SDS Studio Distribution Services (UPC# 883929832460, \$35), just drops straight in on the action and makes the viewer figure everything out on the fly, as it were. David Corenswet plays the comic book hero, an invulnerable savior who must nevertheless overcome minor vulnerabilities in order to protect mankind from itself. He's even making out with Lois Lane from the get go.

Month after month, at least back in the good old days, the Superman character in the comic books would face challenges that he had to overcome despite his imperviousness, and that tradition has continued in motion pictures, although with less creativity, since there are only a couple such films every decade. Gunn's feature, which has a moderately mature tone, may have many of the components one expects from a Superman story, but it still feels fresh and different than what has been done in the past. While it climaxes with the sort of grand destruction that seems to be expected in all big budget comic book spectacles, it still keeps that grand destruction confined to one city (and, in a subplot, a battlefield in a small country), and the 129-minute film begins its final credit roll before the 2-hour mark is passed, if you don't count the gag at the very end. Although one elaborate action sequence, set in a 'pocket universe,' feels too animated—there is not enough reality in it to differentiate it from a cartoon film, although the tradeoff is that the movie can incorporate some viable science-fiction concepts—the rest of the film is consistently witty, studiously efficient and continually invigorating, an almost believable mix of fabulous live action stunts and special effect thrills. Rachel Brosnahan is smartly cast as the hero's worldly and proactive love interest, far less vulnerable than him when you come down to it, and Nicolas Hoult is the human villain, who has plotted distractions and confinements to prevent the hero from thwarting his efforts to enrich himself and maximize his own power. There are also other super villains, other super heroes (who are less ethical than Corenswet's character, but still willing to help out in a pinch), and there are other surprises, as well, such as a 'superdog' (Gunn's most inspired creation—its personality is counterintuitively marvelous), which the villain does not take into account until it is too late. In 4K format, with a boisterous Dolby Atmos audio track and a crisp, seamless image (when a building is destroyed, you see every crumbling brick), the film embraces the format to the point where the format could be the film's namesake.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.9:1. There is an audio track that describes the action ("As the monster claws at its face, it drags its tail over the street, sweeping cars towards a squirrel. Superman scoops up the critter, and brings it to safety."), alternate French and Spanish audio tracks, and optional English, French and Spanish subtitles.

A 6-minute cartoon that is included, *School Bus Scuffle*, depicts the dog with superpowers chasing after a pigeon who has annoyed him, and causing destruction with every encounter, while placing a school bus in danger. The piece may have fairly basic, TV-style artwork, but it is not your daddy's cartoon short. Along with abundant bird poop jokes, the dog character is deliberately ungracious and unrelenting, and the piece's energy is more than enough to hold your attention for its all too brief running time. 109 minutes of great promotional documentaries are also presented, with a lot of behind-the-scenes footage, including a fantastic sequence in which Gunn and Corenswet vociferously work out a problem Corenswet is having with a very key scene while the rest of the crew is standing around, on the clock, waiting to shoot again. You will also want to share one of the shorter documentaries, about the dog, with all of your friends.

### One-man army

In the spectacular finale to Tokuzo Tanaka's 87-minute **Betraval**, which runs more than 15 minutes, the hero, played by Raizo Ichikawa, faces off against a couple of hundred men in a town square, with weapons galore (but, thankfully, no firearms), yet by the time 'The End' appears, he is the only one left standing. Released on Blu-ray by Radiance Films (UPC#760137189800, \$40), Ichikawa's character accepts the blame for the murder of an important figure in another clan even though he had nothing to do with it in the 1966 Daiei production, to give his clan's leadership time to figure out what happened and straighten things out. Unfortunately, the one man who knows he is innocent (other than the actual killers, of course) dies, and so he is left to wander about the countryside, a wanted man. One scene early on is confusing (Ichikawa's character appears to take responsibility for the crime before being asked in a later scene to do so) and there are story ellipses later on, but the basic plot, which also has a significant romantic component, is fully involving. Besides, that finale is grand enough to share with your friends without the context of what has preceded it. The black-and-white picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1, and is continually framed with compelling designs. One shot during a conversation, for example, begins with two characters on opposite sides of the frame. The character on the right walks past the character on the left and the camera follows him until it comes to rest with him now on the left and the other character, who hasn't moved, on the far right. It is moments like that which more than compensate for inconsequential weaknesses or conveniences within the narrative. The image is a little soft at times, but generally in excellent condition, and the monophonic sound is crisp. The film is in Japanese with optional English subtitles and comes with an extensive 51-minute analysis of the film and Tanaka's artistry by Japanese movie historian Tom Mes, including lovely clips from some of Tanaka's other films, and a terrific 10-minute comparison between the film and an intriguing 1925 silent adaptation of the story, *Orochi the Serpent*.

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### Modern martial arts spectacle

In the same way that the dedicated kung fu student achieves the skills he is being taught so well that he eventually exceeds the capabilities of his master, so, too, have the best new martial arts films exceeded the films of the past. Not only do the filmmakers take the new technologies, such as computer effects and drone shots, and apply them to classic martial arts film situations, but they build upon the knowledge of narrative and display that has succeeded in the past in order to leap higher and farther, even if it sometimes seems like they are springing from a leaf or a feather in order to do so. The 2025 romantic adventure and martial arts spectacle, **The Invincible Swordsman**, released on Blu-ray by Well Go USA Entertainment (UPC#81034803-8821, \$32), is a magnificent symbiosis of classic Chinese sword films and modern special effects extravaganzas. And in the same way Haiquan Hu's traditional sounding Chinese musical score subtly infuses electric guitars and other modern touches when the action is so accelerated that you likely won't notice them, so, too, does the movie use its enhanced image manipulation techniques in the place of traditional wirework not to hide the artifice, but, like **Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon**, to celebrate the technique's evocative exaggerations. The film blends outdoor locations with artificial studio sets, which are utilized as much to recall movies from the past as they are to facilitate the narrative's staging. Rapidly unfolding across its entire 120 minutes, the film deftly integrates the emotions of nostalgia with the thrills of state-of-the-art action and compelling conflicts between love and righteousness. Will the movie really have to wait a half-century like so many other martial arts films have waited, before it is appreciated as a classic by western viewers?

Directed by Yiwei Luo, Tim Huang is the young hero, who is happy living a hermit-like existence on a mountain when he is joined by an elderly master at martial arts in a delightful appearance by the now elderly Sammo Hung. After the brief and engaging training period, he becomes involved in the political conflicts between several clans and a ruling villain. There are also three women who fall in love with him. Fights and battles ensue, as do interludes of reflection and romance, and in sorting out who is actually good and who is actually evil, the film takes on political references that cannot help but be applied to the modern world even though, in the best traditions of Chinese filmmaking, there is always the plausible deniability of the story being nothing more than the fantasy tale it is.

The outdoor locations and scenery are gorgeous, and the picture, letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2:1, is exquisite, so that every shot, whether in a natural environment or a manipulated environment, is breathtaking. The image is flawless. The 5.1-channel sound is not overly forceful, but its directional separations are finely detailed and it has enough power to add to the movie's energy at all the right moments. The film is in Mandarin with optional English subtitles, and there is also a serviceable English language track, along with a trailer.

### Hong Kong cult classic

One of the joys of writing fiction is that an author has complete power over the characters, allowing imagination to take them anywhere and confront anything that can be conceived or wished for. The 1992 Hong Kong Golden Harvest cult fantasy thriller, **The Cat**, a Fortune Star 88 Films Blu-ray (UPC#76013718-4065, \$40), opens with an author, played by Waise Lee, setting words—or, rather, ideograms—to a page, as he claims to be telling a true story about what actually happened to him and his companions, beginning with an Edgar Allan Poe-like account of his friend waking up to noises in the woodwork. The tale he tells, however, is a wild action adventure about an alien invasion of Hong Kong that is being combated by good aliens, which is limited only by the cheesy state of Hong Kong special effects during the late Eighties. Nothing more should be said, however, since the joys of the 89-minute film, directed by Nai-choi Lam, are in the discovery of its constantly mutating situations and predicaments, as witnessed by the author and his associates, who help the good aliens in the fight. We do have to mention, however, that one sequence, which could easily be considered the film's highpoint even though it lacks the gooey effects on display in the grand finale, is a martial arts fight in a junkyard, between a 'real' cat and a 'real' dog. You gotta see it to disbelieve it.

Gloria Yip, Phillip Kwok, Siu-ming Lau, Lawrence Lau and Christine Ng costar. The film does not start up where it left off if playback is terminated. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The color transfer is excellent, even though some of the special effects compromise the sharpness of the image. Flestones are accurate and hues are bright. The monophonic sound, in Cantonese with optional English subtitles, is reasonably strong. Along with a trailer, there is 2-minute montage of stills from the film and a great 22-minute interview with screenwriter Gordon Chan talking about his experience on the production before he was replaced. "It's so hard to control a real cat with the technology we had back then. Even now, it's difficult to film cats. So, in a way, it was a disaster to make **The Cat**. Writing it wasn't a problem. Filming it was."

A substantially different Japanese version of the film, entitled **Monster War** (and also known as **Nine Lives**), which was shot in tandem with the Chinese version, has also been included. It is presented in windowboxed format with an aspect ratio of about 2.05:1 and is very smeary, with bland colors and weak contrasts. The film is still mostly in Chinese, with Japanese subtitles on the right side of the image, along with the optional English subtitling underneath the picture, but once in a while several of the central characters do speak in Japanese with one another. The presentation runs 97 minutes and while the gist of the story is the same, the plot has been substantially altered. Lee's character does not appear, and is replaced in concurrently shot scenes directed by Mio Hani with Hidekazu Akai playing a friend or maybe a partner to Kwok's police detective. The two track down the cat and the mysterious woman played by Yip, just as the other two do in the other film. The alterations make it slower and even more esoteric than it was before—if we hadn't seen the Chinese version, we would have had no idea what was going on until

the film's second half—but it made a decent excuse to watch the movie again, particularly since there is quite a bit of new and alternate footage.

Hong Kong film expert Frank Djeng supplies a commentary track for the Chinese version, referencing the Japanese version as well in his informative talk. He describes the plot of the book the film is based upon (part of a very popular series) and pretty much explains everything that happens. He also talks about the production challenges (the first special effects guy got fired because he was endangering the dog and the cat) and goes over the backgrounds of the cast and the filmmakers, as well as providing general cultural insights of Hong Kong life. Wealthy people, he explains, enjoy renting out their homes and properties to movie companies, so they can brag about it if the movie is a hit.

### Thugs and chords

James Toback's 1978 **Fingers** (Mar 03) was a terrible film, full of self-conscious macho drivel, so it is doubly surprising that not only is there a 2005 French remake, Jacques Audiard's **The Beat That My Heart Skipped** (*De Battre Mon Coeur s'est Arrêté*), but that it is such a good movie it has deservedly earned a spot as a Criterion Collection Blu-ray (UPC#715515319515, \$40). Audiard essentially eliminates every narrative problem and thematic embarrassment that Toback's film imposed upon the viewer. Romain Duris is a young, shady real estate developer whose father is also in real estate, but whose late mother was a concert pianist. By chance he meets her former manager, who offers him an audition. Now this may seem like an absurd plot turn, but it is actually brilliantly staged, because Audiard never calls attention to its mechanics. Yes, Duris's character is 'into music' and surrounded by keyboards as a hobby. Meanwhile, although it is never indicated outright, there are enough hints to understand that the manager uses this line to prey upon insecure young men (as per Toback's *The Pick-Up Artist*, but that's another story), and if he also lands a genuine talent, so much the better. In any case, Duris's character finds a teacher and begins practicing in earnest in anticipation of the audition, much to the consternation of his partners, who are inconvenienced by the distractions his efforts are creating. Running 107 minutes, the film is also a very sweet love story, but you don't find out which love story that is among the hero's liaisons until the end of the film. In the meantime, the basic advancement of the narrative—he also has to help his father out of a couple of jams—and the occasional bursts of casual violence directed at squatters and deadbeat renters creates a satisfying counterpoint to the beautifully articulated concentration attending the nuances between a piano piece played well and a piano piece played ordinarily. It is an entertaining and enlightening film, achieving satisfaction and sublimity that Toback never came close to even suggesting.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The color transfer looks fine, with the film favoring the grimy hues of the city's underside. The 5.1-channel DTS sound has exquisite tones and heart-skipping directional effects that seem to isolate instructively the specific sounds of the piano as you follow the hero's development. The film is in French with optional English subtitles and comes with a trailer; a 16-minute talk with Audiard; a 40-minute panel interview from the Berlin Film Festival with a voiceover English translation, linking the film to **Shoot the Piano Player**, explaining how Duris mastered his piano sequences, talking about Audiard's background and his relationship with his father, and other analytical queries; an 8-minute interview with screenwriter Tonino Benacquista, talking about the writing process, what he selected from Toback's film (which he sees as a direct advancement upon **Mean Streets**) and what he disregarded; a 6-minute interview with composer Alexandre Desplat, who talks about filling in the background score between the classical pieces and pop hits; 25 minutes of smartly removed deleted scenes with a commentary by Audiard explaining why they had to go; and 11 minutes of the actors rehearsing various scenes. The film starts up where it left off if playback is terminated, but the special features do not.

### Lanza's colorful screen debut

Young, bright and, um, slender, Mario Lanza appeared in his first MGM feature, **That Midnight Kiss**, in 1949. Having already established himself as a recording star, he made a smooth transfer to feature films playing a deliveryman whose vocal prowess is discovered by the granddaughter of a music philanthropist. Released by Warner Bros. as a *Warner WB Archive Collection* Blu-ray (UPC#840418334638, \$25), Kathryn Grayson is top billed as the granddaughter, who is also beginning her career in the leading role of an opera her grandmother, played by Ethel Barrymore, is underwriting. Pianist Jose Iturbi, playing himself, is the conductor. Keenan Wynn and J. Carrol Naish are also featured. Directed by Norman Taurog, the story sort of twists like the breadsticks in the restaurant that the parents of Lanza's character own to keep the youngsters, who are clearly made for each other, separated until the end, while in the interim there is a steady stream of pleasant performances, straddling classics numbers and what could still be presumed in the Forties to be pop. Most importantly, the squared full screen feature is in fabulous Technicolor, and the transfer on the Blu-ray is eye popping. Not only is the image sharp and meticulously detailed, but the costumes are so vivid that every thread is clearly defined. Both Lanza and Grayson's singing is solidly delivered, but even if their arias, duets and crooning love songs are not to your liking, there are plenty of colorful silks, crepes and so on to hold you mesmerized until they start talking again. Perhaps what is most compelling of all about the feature, however, is that you quickly realize there will never, ever be, even remotely, any movie ever again that is anything like it.

The monophonic sound is free of distortion, and there are optional English subtitles, along with a nice 3-minute number that was dropped from the film, a trailer, an 8-minute color 1948 Tom and Jerry cartoon entitled **Heavenly Puss** (the cat has to persuade the mouse to sign an absolution document so the cat can get into cat heaven) and an 8-minute color 1948 Droopy cartoon, **Senor Droopy**, with lots of bullfighting gags and a great punchline.

### Italian mountain pastoral

The pastoral is a genre that the Italians do really, really well, and a case in point is the lovely 2024 melodrama directed by Maura Delpero, **Vermiglio**, a Janus Films Sideshow Criterion Channel Blu-ray (UPC#715515318112, \$30). Set in a picturesque Italian Alpine village at the end of World War II, the story does not initially focus on the character who will eventually be its central concern but rather on the very large family of a rural schoolteacher. Running 120 minutes, you just sort of settle in with the film, which begins in winter and then transitions to spring and beyond, as you get to know the various children in the family and are transported simply by the ability of Delpero to make the characters interesting and their home inviting. Eventually, a romance develops and there are compelling consequences—there is a sort of ‘OMG’ moment to begin the final act—so it is not as if the story isn’t going anywhere, but its initial presentation is relaxed and utterly transfixing in its depiction of a way of life that has since passed by. Indeed, while the cinematography later on does sharpen its focus, much of the film’s beginning is soft and grainy, in a way that is inviting rather than off putting, so that the nature and texture of the image itself contributes to the tone and atmosphere the viewer can savor. Frankly, it wouldn’t have mattered to us if there had been any story at all.

Even the end credits are soft, and softer around the edges than in the middle, although they are, at the same time, fully legible. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.9:1. Colors are fresh and fleshtones are accurate. The 5.1-channel DTS sound has a solid dimensionality and clear tones. There is also, during the final credit scroll, an extremely impressive display of audio editing rather than score, transitioning in invisible steps from the sounds of a baby to the sounds of the whole village. The film is in Italian with optional English subtitles and comes with a trailer and a comprehensive and rewarding 12-minute talk by Delpero, summarizing her career and explaining her motivations for shooting the feature, which takes place in her ancestral home (“No one had ever filmed there...”).

### Red dawn

A cheap but relatively compelling 1952 feature about an attack on America, **Invasion U.S.A.**, has been released as an impressive two-platter *Archive Collection* Blu-ray by Film Masters (UPC#840418328101, \$32). Running 73 minutes, the squared full screen black-and-white feature uses a substantial amount of archive footage from World War II and Korea to depict an aerial and paratrooper invasion—the film never explicitly says who the enemy is, but they are communists, speak with Nazi accents and start by flying over Alaska—while characters, who are initially sitting together at a bar in New York when the first news reports come in, scatter across the country to experience the subsequent destruction and defeat. Directed by Alfred E. Green, the film can only end one way, but it is a trippy and enjoyable depiction of the many awful things that might happen if war came to our pristine shores and how little we are prepared to deal with it despite our firepower. Gerald Mohr and Peggy Castle star, with Dan O’Herlihy, Robert Bice and Tom Kennedy. Phyllis Coates, Noel Neill and William Schallert have bit parts.

The image quality is terrific. Of course, the stock footage varies, but otherwise the image is sharp and contrasts are finely detailed. The monophonic sound is okay and there are optional English subtitles. A commentary track is included by Fifties film expert Jason Ney, supported by its own set of optional subtitles. He assesses the film pragmatically, discusses the production history and marketing in detail (it made a ton of money), and goes over the backgrounds of the cast and the crew, while also delving into the history of the arm’s race, early Fifties nuclear hysteria and the Cold War (including a complete history of Voice of America). He questions the use of the stock footage to represent invading forces (“What would these American soldiers think of a film like this exploiting the visual record of their service to their country by repurposing it to depict the very enemy the country was currently waging a cold war against?”), but he also praises the existence of the film for allowing us to better understand the social temperament and mindset of the era it represents.

Also featured is a trailer, a great 2-minute montage of memorabilia in still frame (including several marvelous shots of women in bathing suits standing next to models of partially destroyed skyscrapers), an excellent 18-minute interview with Mohr’s son, Anthony (not only does he talk about his father’s career in radio, television and film, he also shares a number of amusing anecdotes of his own confusion as a child over the realities and fantasies of filmmaking) and a decent 36-minute survey of films depicting the fear of communism in the late Forties and Fifties.

Additionally, the disc contains a number of short films that capture the tone of the era, including an excellent color 15-minute General Electric animated educational film from 1952, *A Is for Atom*, that explains atomic chemistry and the uses of atomic power; the undated *A New Look at the H-Bomb*, which is a 10-minute lecture by a Civil Defense official in color as he uses a pointer to highlight several drawings mounted on a cork board in a study or library of some sort while explaining how the fallout from a hydrogen bomb spreads and the best methods to protect yourself from that fallout (number one, of course, being to run like hell, but otherwise, get underground); a levelheaded and informative 24-minute Civil Defense film with somewhat faded colors, *About Fallout*, that essentially explains everything an average person needs to know about radioactive fallout, even if there is no atomic attack to spread it around, mixing animated footage and drawings with photographic footage of people and even magnified images of what grains of fallout actually look like; another faded 23-minute film from the U.S. Air Force, *Stay Safe Stay Strong*, that goes over everything in from what happens inside the atom to what happens outside the bomb, and how there can never, ever be an accidental nuclear explosion if a plane carrying such a bomb crashes or otherwise accidentally discharges its nuclear cargo (it will certainly help you sleep easier...); an 11-minute black-and-white Encyclopedia Britannica film from 1951 entitled *Atomic Alert*, designed for elementary students, that explains what you need to do if a nuclear explosion happens nearby—it’s sort of like a school shooter, only

there’s no place to hide except for the basement in your house; a 14-minute black-and-white mostly animated film (the mushroom clouds are real), *Fallout*, that explains how to protect yourself from fallout and what to do if you are exposed; and a wild 22-minute black-and-white General Electric March of Time film from 1951, letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1 (although the picture looks slightly squashed as a result), —*And a Voice Shall Be Heard!*, which uses Syracuse NY as an example of how important telecommunications are during a disaster (or atomic attack), and how the community has organized itself to deal with such contingencies.

The second platter holds another ambitious low budget Atomic Age thriller, the 1960 *Rocket Attack U.S.A.*, directed by Barry Mahon (in 1958). Running just 64 minutes, much of the film is a spy adventure, with an American agent sent to sabotage a Russian ICBM that is being aimed at New York before America has a chance to develop a missile of its own. Again, a lot of stock footage from the earliest days of the Space Race is put to good use in the movie, which sustains a decent pace and manages to include a reasonably broad array of quickly developed characters as it cuts between America and Russia. Some of the sets may be spare and the acting rudimentary, but the story the movie tells is rather unique and would make a fitting double bill with *Dr. Strangelove*. Monica Davis and John McKay are top billed.

The black-and-white picture is offered in either a squared full screen format or letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1, masking picture information off the top and bottom of the image, and adding no more than a sliver to the sides. The image is generally soft, with slightly weak contrasts. The monophonic sound is adequate.

Film historians C. Courtney Joyner and Mark Legan provide a commentary track, although it is less informative than Ney’s talk. The do go over the backgrounds of a couple of the cast members and Mahon, but they also digress at times to speak at length about Errol Flynn’s career (Mahon had been his manager) and giggle at some of the price saving on the screen, while they discuss the economics of low budget filmmaking (“When you get into movies made this way for this little bit of money, often by regional filmmakers and stuff, we take a step back. The competition among these guys was intense, because they’re all trying to get into the same theaters and the same theater chains, especially in the South and in the inner cities, and so this was not an easy way to go. You really were a traveling salesman.”). They talk about atomic war films, such as *Fail Safe* (based upon the same source novel as *Strangelove*), but they also try to lump *Seven Days in May* into that, even though it has absolutely nothing to do with geopolitical threats, while on the other hand, they never mention *The Bedford Incident*, which is a closer dramatic and emotional parallel to *Rocket Attack U.S.A.* than even *Dr. Strangelove*. Both the film and the commentary are again supported by optional English subtitles.

Along with a trailer, two more period shorts have been included. An interesting undated 9-minute black-and-white Archer Productions film, *Our Cities Must Fight*, is ostensibly presented as a conversation between two reporters, with the images cutting away to stock footage in support of their statements. They discuss the need for people to stay in the city if there is an atomic attack, and not hightail it to the countryside, since that will only cause traffic jams and hinder emergency vehicles. An amazing 14-minute 1956 black-and-white film from Norwood Studios, *Warning Red*, is about a man who goes out for ice cream but doesn’t hear the Civil Defense warning on his car radio. When he pulls back up to his house, an atomic bomb goes off and his neighborhood is left in ruins. Concise and disturbing, the film then shows what is good behavior and bad behavior in such a situation.

Finally, there is a 98-minute **Mystery Science Theater 3000** episode from 1990 that does *Chapter 2* from the Bela Lugosi serial, *The Phantom Creeps*, and then *Rocket Attack U.S.A.*. The quips are moderately witty, although with every day that passes some of them become more and more outdated, and there is a cute game show skit during one of the breaks where they spoof the Civil Defense promotions from the late Fifties and early Sixties.

### Globe-trotting procedural

An epic police procedural that not only crisscrosses Japan, but spans the globe to tell its tale, **Proof of the Man**, has been released on an impressive Blu-ray by Arrow Video (UPC#760137182122, \$40). The 1977 Haruki Kadokawa production, directed by Jun’ya Sato, begins in Harlem where a young man cashes a check at a bank and tells his landlady he is on his way to Japan. The next time you see him, after a Tokyo fashion show, he stumbles out of an elevator with a knife in his gut. The Tokyo cops have to figure out who he is and how he got stabbed, and one detective, played by Yusaku Matsuda, ends up traveling back to New York, where he teams up with a cop played by George Kennedy to research the victim’s background. Joe Yamanaka, Mariko Okada and Kinji Fukasaku costar, with Toshiro Mifune in a brief role and Broderick Crawford playing the boss of Kennedy’s character. The film runs a daunting 132 minutes, and its leisurely pace is established right away with the extended fashion runway sequence that precedes the murder, but at the same time, it is that relaxed and contemplative rhythm that gives the movie an aura of importance and helps to excuse some very Dickensian coincidences along the way. Initially, the film focuses on the massive effort by the Tokyo police to unearth every clue and track down every lead, but as they piece together what happened, resentments and legacies from the end of World War II begin to weave into the narrative they are compiling. Ultimately, some viewers will be put off by the film’s size and presumptions, but others will find the film—ostensibly, the procedural is a subgenre of crime movies known for its fast pace and no-nonsense plot progressions—to be a unique and compelling creation that uses its size and manner to enhance the resonance of the emotional conflicts that are eventually uncovered.



The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The color transfer is terrific, and the late Seventies shots of New York City are exquisitely grimy. The monophonic sound is solid and clear. The film is partially in Japanese and partially in English, the latter supported by permanent Japanese subtitles on the sides of the screen. There are optional English subtitles that default to covering just the Japanese dialog, and a second option that covers everything. A small collection of memorabilia in still frame is included, along with four trailers, a very good 22-minute introduction to the film, and an informative 27-minute history of the film's production.

Asian film expert Rob Buscher and hip-hop music expert Skeme Richards provide a basic commentary track, talking extensively about the experience of Japanese children who had American servicemen fathers and specifically black fathers, and also about the film's music (Yamanaka was a singer with that specific background). When it comes to other aspects of the film, their statements on New York City, Japanese politics, film, culture and so on are a little more generalized, but will still be informative for those who haven't heard too many other commentary tracks before.

### Costume noir

A 1946 costume noir directed by Edgar G. Ulmer, **The Strange Woman**, has been released by Film Masters as an *Archive Collection* Blu-ray (UPC#840418328804, \$24). After a lovely opening bit about an evil child, wonderfully embodied by Jo Ann Marlowe (in a reworked sequence said to have been directed by Douglas Sirk), the child grows up to become Hedy Lamarr, the wife of a much older merchant, played by Gene Lockhart, in pre-Civil War Maine. Louis Hayward plays the merchant's son, and George Sanders plays the foreman of the merchant's logging interests. Lamarr's character manipulates all of them while ostensibly performing charity work for the community, and the 101-minute film only ends when she runs out of steam. While the film is playing out, however, and even during the opening scene with the kids, it is a captivating balance of period decorations, sinister romance and Production Code lust. The performances are appealing and the atmosphere is intriguingly unbalanced—like the men, while you know Lamarr's character is duplicitous, you never know for sure if she is just bad or if she is somehow performing God's will with her actions.

The black-and-white picture is in a squared full screen format, and while soft at times, it is otherwise free of significant wear or shortcomings. The monophonic sound is clean and reasonably clear. Although there are gaps now and then, film historian Bernard M. Prokop provides an informative commentary track, comparing the narrative to the original Ben Ames Williams bestseller, analyzing individual scenes, going over a history of the film's independent production, providing backgrounds of the cast and crew (with more extensive profiles of Lamarr and Ulmer) and pointing out how different individuals in the production often crossed paths in Hollywood. He also suggests that the film is much better designed and executed than films of today, pointing specifically to the bloated nature of **Oppenheimer** for comparison. Both the film and the commentary are supported by optional English subtitles.

The excellent 2017 biography of Lamarr, **Bombshell The Hedy Lamarr Story** (Prokop recommends it, too, and drew a part of his commentary from it), is available on Blu-ray from Zeitgeist Films and Kino Lorber (UPC#738329230449, \$35). Compiled by Alexandra Dean, who managed to get a hold of a lengthy audio interview Lamarr made in 1990 about her life and career, the film works its way through her story from her childhood in Austria, to starring in the most famous 'foreign' erotic film of its day when she was still underage, to landing a Hollywood contract with Louis B. Mayer on a boat sailing from England to America, to her breakout roles in Hollywood and to her patented invention of what is known as 'frequency hopping' that is utilized today in many forms of telecommunications. She also made some very bad film career choices (especially after she began putting her own money into her films, although **Strange Woman** was profitable), did not keep track of her patent and lost out on the billions of dollars of income she could have eventually made from it, devised several plastic surgery techniques that are commonly used in Hollywood today but also endured a number of botched procedures, and died pretty much a recluse with limited means.

Running 89 minutes, the film is both fascinating and rewarding, sharing just brief tidbits of her movie career, but charting its course with a reasonable thoroughness while also tracking the ups and downs of her private life—her children all contributed interviews—and explaining with simple clarity what her invention was and what happened with it. In addition to her family, there are interviews with a number of Hollywood figures, including Robert Osborne, who did manage talk to her in her later years, and Mel Brooks, who in his own way preserved her name for posterity.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1. The film clips come from secondary sources and are a little rough at times, but otherwise the archival footage is in adequate condition and the interviews are fresh and sharp. There is a subdued stereophonic musical score, but the interviews are centered on the 5.1-channel DTS soundtrack. Along with optional English subtitles and a trailer, there are 5 minutes of worthwhile deleted interview segments that drifted too far from the film's center and a great 3-minute talk by Dean about how she put the movie together.

### Ford's last film

John Ford's final feature film, **7 Women**, a succinct 1965 MGM production released as a Warner Bros. *Warner WB Archive Collection* Blu-ray (UPC#840418334621, \$25), is set in Manchuria in the Thirties before the occupation by the Japanese, and is about an American mission that is threatened by an approaching warlord. Running just 87 minutes, the first half of the film is about how the mostly prissy matrons running the outpost are bent out of shape when a pragmatic doctor played by Anne Bancroft arrives, and then the second half is about the consequences of the bandits taking over. Mike Mazurki and Woody Strode play their Mongolian leaders. Margaret Leighton, Flora Robson and Sue Lyon are among the missionaries, and Eddie Albert is also featured. Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1, even though the film's scope of both drama and adventure is confined, the cinematography is invigorating, as is Elmer Bernstein's terrific musical score. It is Ford's blocking, framing and editing that enables the ostensibly overwrought emotional conflicts and dated attitudes to remain consistently engrossing and viscerally satisfying. The mannish Bancroft is marvelous, and the positioning of the characters within the image pulls the viewer through the narrative. It also helps that the color transfer is gorgeous, with fresh, finely detailed hues. When Bancroft does eventually don a Chinese robe, the emotional effect is accentuated by the exquisite decoration and texture of the outfit. The monophonic sound is solidly delivered, adding to the impact of Bernstein's music. There are optional English subtitles, an excellent 4-minute promotional featurette that includes great footage of the set construction and costume tests, and a marvelous 10-minute MGM Chuck Jones animated short from 1965, *The Dot and the Line*, about a line that learns how to make itself into other geometric figures in order to attract the affections of a dot.

### Backstage melodrama

A 1943 Warner Bros. backstage musical melodrama with a touch of noir (there are two suicides over the course of the film), **The Hard Way**, has been released as a *Warner WB Archive Collection* Blu-ray (UPC#84041833-4607, \$25). Joan Leslie plays a stage struck girl from a Pennsylvania mining town who meets a vaudeville team played by Dennis Morgan and Jack Carson on her high school graduation night and is persuaded to join their act. Ida Lupino plays her older sister, who goes along to watch over things. There are snippets of many wonderful Warner Bros. tunes and other popular songs, and a few that play for more extended segments, while Lupino's character guides Leslie's character to stardom and heartbreak. Directed by Vincent Sherman with cinematography from James Wong Howe, the 110-minute feature advances at a steady pace, with finely textured images that enhance the appeal of each star and keep the viewer involved in every emotional conflict.

The full screen black-and-white image is spotless and adds greatly to the film's captivating tensions. There appear to be a couple of hidden splices, but otherwise the presentation is flawless. The monophonic sound is solid and clear, and there are optional English subtitles. Also featured are a trailer; a color 1943 *Merrie Melodies* cartoon running 7 minutes, *The Aristocat*, about a spoiled cat living in a mansion who is left alone after teasing the butler too much and must learn for himself the difference between mice and dogs; a 1943 black-and-white *Looney Tunes* war effort cartoon running 8 minutes, *Scrap Happy Daffy*, in which the duck is running a scrap yard and urging viewers to turn in all their junk, much to the annoyance of a spoofy Adolf Hitler, who tries to spoil his efforts with a Nazi goat; *Gun to Gun*, a condensed but workable black-and-white 18-minute live action western from 1943 about a villain trying to take over land near Los Angeles and a cattleman who manages to stop him; *Over the Wall*, a condensed but workable black-and-white 21-minute prison drama from 1944 about a clergyman who helps an escapee see the light; and a decent 60-minute 1944 *Lux Radio Theatre* adaptation of the feature film hosted by Cecil B. DeMille and starring Franchot Tone, Miriam Hopkins, Ann Baxter, Chester Morris, which catches the story's dramatic highlights in a reasonably effective manner.

### Early Sturges

John Sturges made so many classic films in the late Fifties and Sixties that his many earlier features deserve a great deal more attention than they have generally received. A case in point is his 1950 RKO Radio Pictures drama, **The Capture**, which has been released by Allied Vaughn Entertainment and Film Masters as an *Archive Collection* Blu-ray (UPC#840-418326251, \$22). Set in Mexico, thus creating a blend of a western and a Sunbelt noir, Lew Ayres is an oil company employee who tracks down a suspect in a payroll holdup and kills him, not realizing that the man could not raise his arm to surrender. His conflicted feelings over the incident lead him to quit his job and eventually find employment with the wife of the man he killed, played by Teresa Wright. We won't go into the details—most of the story is told in flashback—but he ends up in the same situation, with the police surrounding him and his arm too injured to raise in surrender. On paper, the film probably seems rather stupid, especially since a viable romance develops between the two leads, but it is Sturges's staging and sense of pace that makes the entire 90-minute feature an entertaining experience, its shifting atmospheres and emotions creating an enjoyable rollercoaster adventure. The action scenes—Sturges's forte—are deftly executed, but the romance is also believably conveyed, and so while the premise may be dubious, the film is well made and fully engaging.

The squared full screen black-and-white picture is a little soft, but is otherwise in very good condition, with no significant markings. The monophonic sound is fine, and there are optional English subtitles. Victor Jory costars, and Duncan Renaldo makes a brief but cheery appearance.

## Flying

In the spirit of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, a lovely 1974 Dutch adventure film about flying, with just enough of a thriller framework to get it off the ground, **Dakota**, has been released on Blu-ray by Cult Epics (UPC# 881190022597, \$35). Running 102 minutes, the captivating 15-minute opening has no dialog at all as it observes a pilot, played by Kees Brusse, arriving in the morning to service his two-engine DC-3 cargo plane on a remote airfield in the Caribbean, taking several boxes delivered from the back of an open truck, flying out to what is little more than a spit of sand in the middle of the sea and dropping the boxes onto the sand without landing (thank goodness for autopilot), and then returning and lying to the authorities about where he has been. He then gets roped into an even bigger scheme, and that leads to an even longer sequence without dialog as he eventually flies a number of boxes of contraband from Venezuela to The Netherlands, pumping fuel into his tanks while in the air and sleeping while the autopilot flies the plane. Directed by Wim Verstappen, it is the attention to the mechanical details of the flight that is the primary appeal of the film, helped greatly by Brusse's engaged and fully persuasive performance. There are other characters—Monique van de Ven costars—nicely crafted for the brief times they are on the screen, and an atmosphere of crime and danger, but that is all of secondary importance, as if it was the plane of the title that was the movie's central character and not the human steering it.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. Jan de Bont did some of the cinematography. Colors are fresh, but the source material has a little bit of wear at times, including a couple of prominent scratches, and weak contrasts here and there. The monophonic sound is solid. The film is in Dutch with optional English subtitles. Dutch film expert Peter Verstraten supplies a fascinating commentary track. His talk is heavily accented, so it takes a bit of concentration, but he begins with a history of the primary filmmakers, including Verstappen and producer Pim de la Parra, and then goes into how they made so much money on a previous film that de la Parra bought Verstappen the DC-3 and they began to plan a movie around it. To make a long and complicated story short, the movie was to have been a regular thriller, but de Bont and van de Ven started playing footsie on an especially long flight to a location and ended up in a steamy relationship, which so annoyed everyone else on the crew that they were canned. Hence, the narrative was altered (there is one 'dream' sequence with van de Ven, who is otherwise only seen in the film's preliminary segment) and cinematographer Theo van de Sande was brought on to finish what de Bont had started (it is also said the Paul Verhoeven had placed a curse on the entire production because of what the filmmakers had said about one of his earlier films, but that's another story). In any case, the thriller aspects involving van de Ven as a femme fatale had to be jettisoned, but the happy result of that is the film's very unique and oddly satisfying narrative. Verstraten also supplies briefer backgrounds for the other cast members, goes over a history of DC-3s in Holland, and talks about the locations and other details.

Additionally, there is a trailer, a nice collection of memorabilia in still frame, 8 minutes of home movies from the Cannes Film Festival in which the animosities between van de Ven and the filmmakers are still simmering, and a fascinating 19-minute piece shot on the plane itself, which the filmmakers were using to shuttle Dutch reporters to a promotional event at Cannes, only to have one of the engines on the plane go out—as it does in the film—so that they end up standing around on an airfield while it gets repaired, silently fretting about how unsafe it might be. Beware. For some reason, the piece has been intercut with shots from a black-and-white hardcore sex film.

## Which one is the hero?

A terrific thriller that was shot in Uganda but could just as easily be taking place in a suburb of Atlanta or something, **Dial M for Maya**, has been released on DVD by Indiepix Unlimited (UPC#845637064861, \$25). A divorced businessman meets a woman in a bar and marries her after a whirlwind romance, but soon begins to suspect that she is not who she is claiming to be. Directed by Matthew Kavuma, the film is simple, and cleanly executed, with each dramatic idea advanced efficiently and smoothly. Starring Mathew Kavuma and Zion Kente, both characters may or may not have hidden pasts, and the film deftly swings the viewer's sympathies back and forth between the two of them. Running 82 minutes, once the odd behaviors begin, the narrative becomes more and more intriguing, and builds its suspense effectively to its finale, so that you are never sure until the end which character you should be rooting for.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. Intermittently, but taking up roughly about half of the film, there are tiling, smearing and displacement errors, as well as jerky movement, that can interfere with the entertainment now and then. When it is not present or mostly subdued, the image is in excellent condition, with crisp lines, bright hues and accurate, detailed fleshtones. The stereo sound has a viable dimensionality and is reasonably strong. The film is in English, with optional English subtitles.

## Loud and sweet

You might want to take an aspirin before starting up the 2000 Bollywood romantic comedy, **Hadh Kar Di Aapne**, a Shemaroo Ltd. Leomark Studios Blu-ray (UPC#840418334362, \$24), because it starts out as if it is on the proverbial steroids. The attempts at comedy, which, of course, are a cultural thing to begin with, are loud, in your face and unrelenting. One performer is reminiscent of Little Richard at his wildest moments, and he is one of the calmer ones. There is also a dinner table scene in which the star, known as Govinda, imitates Eddie Murphy playing all of his character's family members, but with less character depth. It takes quite a

while to sort through the intentionally comical shouting, screaming and physical bashing to piece together that a friend of Govinda's character is hiring him to go on a European tour to gather evidence of his wife's infidelity for a divorce, while the wife hires a friend of hers, played by Rani Mukerji, to go on the same tour to gather evidence of the husband's infidelity—each pretending that it is they themselves and not their friends who have gone on the trip. Thus, when your aspirin kicks in and the movie finally, sort of settles down, there is a sweet love story in which Govinda and Mukerji's characters believe they have fallen in love with the spouses of their friends. Aided by the film's overabundant energy, the songs, although there are not enough of them, are lively and appealing. Running 140 minutes, most of the film is set during the tour, thus using the broadly comical antics of the other passengers to fill in the story transitions. Parts of the film were shot in Switzerland and Florida (subbing for Europe—don't ask). Directed by Manoj Agrawal, Mukerji is cute as a button, and while Govinda can never entirely get away from seeming like a jerk, he does manage to suppress it just enough at the right moments so that the film turns into the appealing, sweet romance you never, ever thought it would manage to become.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The image is consistently sharp (except when the cinematography is out of focus) and brightly colored (although you really don't want some of the vivid close-ups of the various character actors mugging as if their lives depended upon it). The end credits have a Dolby logo, and the disc has a two-channel Dolby track, but the sound remains centered throughout the film, although that doesn't stop the songs from rousing your enthusiasm. The film is in Hindi with permanent English subtitles.

## A masterpiece of bad filmmaking

While some Bollywood features are genuinely artistic and resonately satisfying, and others are a pleasing blend of astute design and seductive camp, a few are appealing entirely because of how bad they are, and you won't find a better example of grand, irresistible badness, with action, melodrama, slapstick and several token but catchy songs (or, rather, the same song with different lyrics and a couple of notes moved around), than the 1974 **Roti**, which has been released on Blu-ray by Shemaroo Ltd. and Leomark (UPC#840418334553, \$24). Indeed, the final frames of the film, where the intention is to amplify the pathos of the final scene by bringing in several additional characters to fret over the fate of the hero and his girlfriend had us, instead, rolling on the floor with laughter—but no way are we going to spoil that pleasure for others, because it is the unexpected nature of the surprise that makes it so hysterically funny. Everything about the film is inept, but that is what renders it so irresistible. It is episodic in structure, following the life of a young boy who becomes a thief after he fails to bring the flatbread of the title back to his starving mother before she expires. He is taken under wing by a gangster and grows up learning the skills of a criminal even though his heart is essentially good. Played as an adult by Rajesh Khanna, he ends up in prison on the gallows, but escapes at the last moment (another utterly silly but marvelous surprise, and a year before Charles Bronson did it!), making his way to a remote Kashmir village where he pretends to be the college friend of the son (supposedly away at college, although nobody realizes that the hero threw the kid off a train in a scuffle) of an elderly blind couple, and then becomes a substitute school teacher although he actually doesn't know how to read. As the police search for him, the people around him come to have a great affection for him, and even the local gangster who wants to foreclose on the blind people's house so he can build a hotel is eventually endeared to him. At the end, he and the local girl who has fallen for him, played by an engaging actress named Mumtaz, are running across the snow trying to reach the border before the cops catch up to them, or at least get in range of their high-powered rifles. Running 156 minutes, the action scenes are inept (punches that supposedly send characters flying actually miss by a mile), the special effects are ridiculous (there is the least persuasive avalanche ever to drop snow on deserving gangsters) and even the cute romantic scenes (the heroine's character quirk is that she likes to smoke cigarettes) are weird. At one point she dresses up as an old man in a beard to flirt with him. Directed by Manmohan Desai (inspired by the 1959 Fred MacMurray western, *Face of a Fugitive*), every scene in the film has some sort of flaw or glaringly ridiculous aspect, but its errors and silliness compound until the only reaction a viewer can have is to embrace the film wholeheartedly as the masterpiece of wrongheaded filmmaking that it is.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1. While the colors are off in one segment, overall the image transfer is sharp and accurate, and wear is minimal. The monophonic sound reasonably stable, and the film is in Hindi with permanent English subtitles.

## Colbert and Robinson, together

Two powerhouse movie stars of the Thirties, Claudette Colbert and Edward G. Robinson, are top billed in a forgotten hour-long Paramount crime thriller from 1929 directed by Robert Florey, **The Hole in the Wall**, which is available on DVD from Alpha Video (UPC#089218868299, \$10). Not only is it a surprisingly decent film for its time and budget (among other things, there is an impressively staged-on-the-cheap elevated subway crash), but the two stars are already at the top of their game so far as their performances are concerned. This was apparently Robinson's first turn on the screen as a criminal mastermind, but he acts like he's been doing it all of his life. He and his compatriots, including a character played by Donald Meeks, are running a phony spiritualist scam and then burglarizing the homes of their wealthiest clients. When the woman who fronts the act is killed in the train crash, Colbert's character, who has a record and needs a job, takes her place.



Running 62 minutes, the film has an impressive atmosphere clearly inspired by the German Expressionists long before 'noir' style became a thing—in fact, Florey appears to be specifically imitating Fritz Lang with his angular set designs and cuts to close-ups. Most importantly, the performances (including Meeks) are richly textured and sharply delivered, adding as much as can be added to the narrative and its production constraints. On the downside, the squared full screen black-and-white picture is very soft, with limited contrasts that remove details from faces and costumes at times, and otherwise blur the expressions of the actors. There are also plenty of scratches and speckles. The monophonic sound has limitations as well, but background noise and distortion disappears entirely during the scenes that were shot silent, so attention has been paid to preserving the audio as best as it can be preserved. There is no captioning.

### Early Holmes

The film that set the stage for the many Sherlock Holmes features that followed it, the 1931 **Sherlock Holmes' Fatal Hour**, with Arthur Wontner as Holmes and Ian (billed as 'Jan') Fleming as Watson, has been released on Blu-ray by Film Masters (UPC#840418328491, \$22). We reviewed a previous release by Film Detectives in **The Sherlock Holmes Vault Collection** Blu-ray set (Jan 22), and the transfer appears to be similar. The squared full screen black-and-white picture is intensely grainy and has weak contrasts at times, but when the film's age and British production history are taken into account, it is in decent shape. The monophonic sound is reasonably clear, and there are optional English subtitles that help with a heavily accented phrase here and there. Unlike the Film Detectives presentation, the movie starts up where it left off if playback is terminated. While the presentation is not overly different from a stageplay, the film's lighting is exceptionally good—no more so than the opening murder, which occurs in a completely dark bank vault illuminated by a single shaft of light—and the editing provides the 81-minute feature with an engaging pace. Wontner's character is asked to investigate the murder—the bank guard was killed, but nothing was removed from the vault. At the same time, he is asked by a young woman to persuade her brother to stop cheating at cards. As we said in our previous review, the film is 'elementary' in its narrative and structure, but the atmosphere and characters are irresistible, as countless follow ups would prove again and again.

### September Special Edition: Minnelli and more

Our Sep 25 Special Edition featured Vincente Minnelli Blu-rays, several programs about Marie Antoinette, the new **Matlock** TV series and much more, and is available for free as a PDF file for download, which can be requested by writing Special Edition at DVDLaser@rocketmail.com. You can also sign up to get each month's Special Editions as a PDF file if you have a regular snail mail subscription, by writing the same email address. Those who already have an email subscription receive them automatically. If you have no access to a computer and want a hard copy, we unfortunately have to charge \$10 to cover our expenses for each individual Edition (\$15 outside of the U.S.). Please write to Special Edition %The DVD-Laser Disc Newsletter, PO Box 382, Glen Cove NY 11542, and include a check or credit card details.

The reviews featured include the Warner Bros. Blu-ray releases of **The Bad and the Beautiful** (UPC#883929699933, \$24), **Cabin in the Sky** (UPC#810134949065, \$24), **Father of the Bride** (UPC#888574389505, \$24), **Father's Little Dividend** (UPC#810134942622, \$24), **The Courtship of Eddie's Father** (UPC#810134940284, \$24), **The Cobweb** (UPC#840418328989, \$25) and DVD releases of **The Bad and the Beautiful** (UPC#883929712274, \$13), the 1938 **Marie Antoinette** (UPC#883316860212, \$14), **You The Complete Third Season** (UPC#883929799572, \$25), **You The Complete Fourth Season** (UPC#883929838585, \$25), **Death Valley** (UPC#883929838653, \$30); the PBS DVDs **Marie Antoinette Season One** (UPC#841887048491, \$40) and **Marie Antoinette Season Two** (UPC#841887047234, \$40); the Sony Pictures Home Entertainment Blu-ray of the 2006 **Marie Antoinette** (UPC#043396490789, \$30); eOne Entertainment's Blu-ray release of **Farewell, My Queen** (UPC#741952738190, \$30); the HBO DVD releases, **The White Lotus The Complete Third Season** (UPC#883929838455, \$25) and **Sharp Objects** (UPC#883929829538, \$25); Paramount's DVD release, **Matlock Season One** (UPC#840418327050, \$33); Liberation Hall's Blu-ray release, **The Buster Keaton Show** (UPC#810177214625, \$30); the WGBH Boston Video DVD releases of **Jane Eyre** (UPC#783421416192, \$35) and **Howards End** (UPC#841887043250, \$35); The Criterion Collection's Blu-ray release of **Howards End** (UPC#715515051019, \$40) and DVD release (UPC#715515055314, \$25); Home Vision's DVD release of **Howards End** (UPC#037429198223, \$30); Cleopatra Entertainment's DVD release, **Rock Bottom** (UPC#889466456897, \$20); MVDVisual's Blu-ray releases of **Terminus** (UPC#760137147954, \$40) and **The Bikini Carwash Company I & II** (UPC#760137169994, \$25), and their combination Blu-ray & DVD release of **Psycho Tronica Collection Vol 2 Mondo Keyhole**; Highway Entertainment's DVD releases **Roseanne Barr ★Is★ America** (UPC#760137177937, \$15); and the Film Masters Blu-ray release of **Class of '74** (UPC#840418326916, \$26).

### DVD News

**CRITERION CORNER:** Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's classic **I Know Where I'm Going!** is being released in 4K format by The Criterion Collection with a commentary featuring film historian Ian Christie; an introduction by Martin Scorsese with restoration demonstration featuring commentary by Thelma Schoonmaker Powell; behind-the-scenes stills narrated by Schoonmaker Powell; **I Know Where I'm Going! Revisited**, a 1994 documentary by Mark Cousins; a photo-essay by writer Nancy Franklin exploring the locations used in the film; and home movies from one of Powell's Scottish expeditions, narrated by Schoonmaker Powell. Tim Burton's **Pee-wee's Big Adventure** will be in 4K and will feature a commentary by Burton and Paul Reubens; a commentary by Danny Elfman (over a music-only soundtrack to the film); an interview with Burton and actor-filmmaker Richard Ayoade; interviews with cowriter Michael Varhol, editor Billy Weber, production designer David L. Snyder, and producer Richard Abramson, conducted by critic Mark Olsen; an interview with Reubens from Hollywood's **Master Storytellers** (2005); excerpts from the fortieth anniversary screening of the film presented by Nostalgic Nebula and hosted by comedian Dana Gould; and deleted scenes. **Return to Reason: Four Films by Man Ray** will feature *Le retour à la raison*, *Emak*

*bakia*, *L'étoile de mer*, and *Les mystères du château du dé*, and will have an interview with Jim Jarmusch and Carter Logan, who formed the avant-rock band SŪRL, along with a concert from 2023 featuring SŪRL performing its semi-improvised score to Man Ray's films. Mira Nair's **Salaam Bombay!** will be in 4K format and will come with commentaries featuring Nair and director of photography Sandi Sissel; a conversation between Nair and composer L. Subramaniam; archival interviews with screenwriter Sooni Taraporevala and actors Aneeta Kanwar, Bernard Sissel, Shafiq Syed, and Hansa Vithal; and a program about the Salaam Baalak Trust and its mission to support the street children of Mumbai. Howard Hawks's **His Girl Friday** will be in 4K, accompanied by a restoration of the 1931 *The Front Page*, made from a recently discovered print of director Lewis Milestone's preferred version, with uncompressed monaural soundtrack; an interview with film scholar David Bordwell; archival interviews with Hawks; featurettes from 1999 and 2006 about Hawks and Rosalind Russell; a radio adaptation of **His Girl Friday** from 1940; a program about the restoration of *The Front Page*; a program about playwright and screenwriter Ben Hecht; and radio adaptations of the play *The Front Page* from 1937 and 1946. Spike Lee's **David Byrne's American Utopia** will be in 4K format and will have a documentary featuring Lee, Byrne, cinematographer Ellen Kuras, dancer-vocalist Tendayi Kuumba, choreographer and musical stager Annie-B Parson, lighting designer Rob Sinclair, and bassist Bobby Wooten III.

**NEW IN BLU:** The following titles have recently been released on Blu-ray—Glitch Ditch 64 (Acid Bath); Drug-O-Rama (AGFA); Empowering Women in Peril 5 Film Collection (All Channel); The Brokenwood Mysteries Season 11, Clown in a Cornfield, Dark Winds Season 3, Revealers (AMD); Dead in Love (Ariztal); Materialists (A24); A Gilded Game (Bayview); Big Helium Dog (Big Choice); Raging Grace (Brainstorm); Elio (Buena Vista); Huskies, Mont Foster, Voodun (Burning Bulb); Winter Kept Us Warm (Canadian); Mutilator 2 (Cardinal); Breathless, Castle of Evil, Confessions of a Psycho Cat, Fire Maidens of Outer Space, 5 Dead on the Crimson Canvas, Habit, No Telling, Playroom, The Punishment, Sexomania / Lady Desire, Sgt. Kabukiman, So Unreal, Swimming to Cambodia, Veena Vengeance of the Vampire (CAV); Samurai Resurrection, My Life As a Zucchini (Cinedigm); M\*A\*S\*H The Comedy That Changed Television (Crew Neck); The Beat That My Heart Skipped, Born in Flames, Flow, The French Dispatch, Isle of Dogs, Misericordia, Read My Lips (Criterion); Aleksandr Ptushko Fantastika Box, The Devil's Bride, Ilya Muromets, The Pied Piper + Jiri Barta Shorts, Ruslan and Ludmila, Sampo, The Tale of Tsar Saltan (Deaf Crocodile); The Occupant, The Ritual, Watch the Skies (Decal); Redlands (Dekalog); You're So Cool Brewster The Story of Fright Night (ETR); The Strange Woman, Sherlock Holmes' Fatal Hour (Film Masters); The Gullspang Miracle, My Love Don't Cross That River (Film Movement); He Who Gets Slapped (Flicker Alley); The Jester from Transylvania (Gemini); Rebel (Giant); Abducted in Plain Sight, All Summer's End, Americano, Being Rose, The Bill Murray Stories, Cognitive, The Demon Detective, Downeast, The Forgotten Battalion, Her Name Was Jo, The House in Between, Interreflections, Love Shot, Making a Killing, Nothing Is Truer Than Truth, Song for Our People, A Song for You The Austin City Limits Story, Songs for a Sloth, Swimming Home, Take Me to Tarzana, Third Wheel, Too Late, What Still Remains, Wheeler, White Demise, Who Am I Now? (Gravitas); We Might As Well Be Dead (Hope Runs High); Raphael A Portrait (Ideas); Name the Demon (Indie Rights); Airport, Airport 1975, Airport '77, The Concorde Airport '79, Airplane II The Sequel, Blur to the End, Dan Curtis' Late-Night Mysteries, Dear Ruth, Father Brown Detective, The 44 Specialist, French without Tears, Hiding Out, Il Dono, Maedchen in Uniform, Night of the Juggler, Radioland Murders, Unicorns, The Wrong Arm of the Law (Kino); Blood Born, Dark Entities, Evil at the Door, The Healing, Holy Mother, Marla, The Mummy's Kiss, The Mummy's Kiss 2nd Dynasty, The Murder Podcast, Slayed, Snow Angel, Sorority of the Damned, Tales of Frankenstein (Leomark); Ballerina, The Home, Little House on the Prairie The Complete Series, The Surfer (Lionsgate); Bride Hard, 40 Acres (Magenta); Brenda Lee Rockin' Around The Story of the Iconic Singer (Mercury); Confessions of an Alcoholic Hitman, Diary of the Underdogs, Into the Further, Zombie Anonymous (Mega Reel); When Black Birds Fly, Where the Dead Go to Die (Mountain); Breaking the Girls, Young & Beautiful, Zenithal (MPI); Just the Two of Us (Music Box); Airport, Airport '77, Best Christmas Movies Ever!, The Betrayal, The Buster Keaton Show, Dakota, Flaming Brothers, The Good the Bad the Weird, Hellbender, The Last Horror Film, Los Golfos, Proof of the Man, Raw Meat, Santo contra Hombres Infemales aka Santos vs. Infernal Men (MVD); The Life of Chuck (Neon); The Taste of Mango, Vulcanizadora (Oscilloscope); Hot Breath/Cold Air, Mercy Falls, The Womb (Random); Pointed Heels (Reel Vault); Swap Me Baby, Voice of Shadows (Rising Sun); My Crepus (Saturn's Core); This Is My Father, 28 Years Later (Sony); Blood Weekend (Sterling); Chuckie Complete Series, Honey Don't, Law & Order SVU Season 26, M3gan 2.0, My Dead Friend Zoe (Universal); The Emu War (Umbrella); Ice Road Vengeance (Vertical); Permanent Damage (VHShtiff); Aztec Batman Clash of Empires, The Beast of the City, The Beggar's Opera, The Big Bang Theory Complete Series, Black Samson, 50s Sci-Fi Collection, Fringe Complete Series, I Died a Thousand Times, The Last of Us Season 2, Superman, Touché Turtle and Dum Dum Complete Series (Warner); Affinity, Bang, Flashpoint, Ghost Killer, Hidden Face, Lookout, River of Blood, The Last Ronin, Yadang The Snitch (Well Go).

**NEW IN 4K:** The following titles have recently been released in 4K format—Elio, The Sound of Music, Tron, Tron Legacy (Buena Vista); Breathless, No Telling (CAV); Mama, Peking Opera Blues, Salvador (Cinedigm); Flow, The French Dispatch, High and Low, Isle of Dogs, Read My Lips, This Is Spinal Tap (Criterion); Airplane II The Sequel, Airport, Airport 1975, Airport '77, The Concorde Airport '79, Hiding Out, Night of the Juggler (Kino); Ballerina (Lionsgate); Creepshow II, The Good the Bad the Weird, Lost in Space, Raw Meat (MVD); The Life of Chuck (Neon); Krull, Night of the Living Dead, 28 Years Later (Sony); Cinderella Man, Coal Miner's Daughter, Dracula Complete Legacy Collection, Jurassic World Rebirth, Kung Fu Panda 2, M3gan 2.0, Speak No Evil (Universal); Aztec Batman Clash of Empires, Corpse Bride, Diamonds Are Forever, Dr. No, From Russia with Love, Goldfinger, The Last of Us Season 2, A Nightmare on Elm Street 7-Film Collection, Superman, Thunderball, You Only Live Twice (Warner); Ghost Killer (Well Go).

