

The eccentricities of Robert Altman

Like chocolate covered grasshoppers, Robert Altman's **O.C. and Stiggs** is such an acquired taste that even those who love chocolate are unwilling to sample it. Bankrolled by MGM/UA in the wake of **Fast Times at Ridgmont High** and **Porky's** in the early Eighties, the film was inspired by a National Lampoon story (apparently, nobody wanted to spend the cash to add that moniker to the title, however) and was embraced by Altman as an opportunity to satirize American suburbia. Shot in Scottsdale Arizona in 1983, Daniel H. Jenkins and Neill Barry are the eponymous heroes, high school seniors who play a series of revenge pranks upon a wealthy insurance agent, played by Paul Dooley, after his company refused to cover the grandfather of Jenkins's character, played by Ray Walston (a slam-dunk **Ridgmont High** link, right?). There is a plethora of secondary characters and an ostensibly stellar cast that includes Jane Curtain, Martin Mull, Jon Cryer, Dennis Hopper (playing a paranoid vet—the film includes elaborate callbacks to **Apocalypse Now**), Tina Louise, Cynthia Nixon, Louis Nye, Bob Uecker, Tiffany Helm, Nina Van Pallandt, Victor Ho and Melvin Van Peebles. Altman, however, did not have his finger on the pulse of the American youth, and very little of the comedy or narrative in the film spoke to their zeitgeist. Hence, the 110-minute film, at first glance, and even after an initial viewing, can seem as appetizing as the aforementioned grasshoppers.

But here is the thing. The iconoclastic Altman was both a genius and one of America's greatest film directors. Sure, he had a couple of misfires, but even his worst movies have moments of interest and wit, and **O.C. and Stiggs** is by no means his worst film. If you can force yourself to watch it more than once, thus eliminating any preconceived notions about its obvious shortcomings, what you will find is a consistently amusing and bizarre adventure through a twisted vision of American consumer culture. In fact, the film is so engorged with comedic inspirations happening on the edges of a scene that once you get hooked on it, you want to go back and revisit the film again and again, not just to pick up on the gags you missed, but to reassess the ones you thought you understood and dismissed on an earlier pass.

To these ends, Amazon MGM and Radiance have released the film on Blu-ray (UPC#760137198734, \$40), letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. To provide one of many, many examples. At one point, the boys go into a fairly crowded sports bar restaurant. Uecker, in his only scene in the film, is sitting at a table, spouting off a wonderful monolog about how baseball is more macho than football (football uses rubber cleats, baseball uses spikes; football players go to 'camp,' baseball players go to 'Spring Training'; and on and on) to no one in particular. The boys acknowledge his presence vaguely, and then pay no attention to him as they go about their business with other people in the restaurant. Even the optional English subtitles let go of him to focus on what the two stars are saying, but if you ignore the plot and just listen to Uecker, he never stops spewing his shtick, and he is funny as all get out. Altman's best films have a serious dramatic thread, or several, woven into the comedy and **O.C. and Stiggs** does not, but otherwise it is an amazingly elaborate concoction, flitting with the barest of narrative links from one situation to the next, amid the constant inventiveness of both the cast and the crew, not entirely knowing what they are doing but trusting that Altman does. In this case, maybe he didn't, but what he created can become a radically guilty pleasure if given enough chances.

When the film finally came off of MGM's shelf, we reviewed a DVD in Jan 06. The picture quality on the Blu-ray is somewhat stronger, although it is still, like the DVD, rather grainy at times, particularly during its night sequences. Otherwise, when the cinematography is sharp and smooth, the image is as well, and the monophonic sound is stronger and clearer than it was on the DVD, making it easier to pick up the castaway gag lines.

An impressive and comprehensive 129-minute oral history of the film's creation and legacy presents retrospective audio interviews with many members of the cast and crew, playing over still photos and clips from the movie, creating a clear image in the listener's mind of how the production was set up, Altman's unique filmmaking methods (best described as carefully organized anarchy), and what went on during the downtime between shooting days. Even more black-and-white production photos are presented in a terrific still frame section, along with an excellent 11-minute interview with Altman's son, Robert Reed Altman, who worked as a camera operator on the set, describing his father's filmmaking strategies and what he recalls of the shoot.

Altman's very eccentric 1970 MGM comedy, **Brewster McCloud**, available from Warner Bros. as a Warner WB Archive Collection Blu-ray (UPC# 888574722586, \$23), pushed at the same limits of staging and humor that **O.C. and Stiggs** toys with, except that there is a clearer, straightforward (if bizarre) storyline, and it was still, for all intents and purposes, the Sixties, when pushing boundaries was embraced at the boxoffice, at least sometimes. Shot in Houston, the late Bud Cort plays a bird enthusiast surreptitiously living in the basement of the Astrodome (much of the film was shot on site) and constructing an Icarus-like flying device, while an apparently literal guardian angel, played by the divine Sally Kellerman, not only watches over him, but arranges—off screen (all we see is bird poop dropping on the victims—such poop also causes a key event in **O.C. and Stiggs**)—the murder of anyone who threatens his well being. Shelley Duvall, in her first screen role, is a Dome tour guide who strikes up a relationship with him, and in a very extensive lampoon of **Bullitt** weaving through much of the 105-minute film, Michael Murphy is a San Francisco detective called in to investigate the murders. There are also cutaways to Rene Auberjonois, playing an ornithology professor who shares pertinent facts about birds and becomes

more and more birdlike himself each time he appears. Notable supporting players include Margaret Hamilton, doing a start-and-stop rehearsal of *The Star-Spangled Banner* that causes the film's entire opening credits to stop and restart in one of the film's first gags (her off-key singing is the first laugh, unless you get a giggle at just seeing her on the podium); Bert Remsen, spewing racial epithets that would be frowned upon today even though they are in character; and Altman stalwart John Schuck; along with Jennifer Salt, William Windom and Stacy Keach. The film was indeed too strange to be a very big hit at the boxoffice, despite an elaborate car chase sequence with plenty of stunts, but it has its charms, combining lowbrow slapstick humor with a gratifyingly abstract and imaginative premise, and Altman's always invigorating blocking that can have many things happening on the screen at the same time as he flits from one focal perch to the next.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. Like a number of Altman's earlier films, the cinematography can be fairly grainy at times, because of his adventuresome staging. Colors are accurate, and the image is sharp and smooth when the lighting is accommodating. The monophonic sound is in good condition, and there are optional English subtitles, along with a trailer.

Altman's very sweet 2006 New Line Cinema tribute to Garrison Keillor's contemporary radio program, **A Prairie Home Companion**, can also seem anarchic at first glance, even though it is more polished and sophisticated than his older comedies. Keillor's syndicated program was itself a nostalgic tribute to radio's Golden Age, and the film is a nostalgic tribute to what Keillor's had created, substituting the genuine acts that he employed with big name movie stars having a grand time pretending to be lower level entertainers. Meryl Streep and Lily Tomlin play a sister duo (with Lindsay Lohan as the daughter of Streep's character) and Woody Harrelson and John C. Reilly play a cowboy duo. Jearlyn Steele is also featured as a singer, while Keillor's does his own numbers and harmonizes at times with the others. But the 105-minute film is not just music, as a good portion of the running time is allotted to the backstage activities—it is supposedly the final night of the show, because the venue has been bought out and is shutting down. L.Q. Jones, Marylouise Burke, Maya Rudolph and Tim Russell are featured, with Kevin Kline playing a sort of loopy movie-detective-like security guard and Tommy Lee Jones showing up briefly near the end as the buyer. Adding a touch of fantasy, Virginia Madsen has the same sort of role that Kellerman had in **Brewster McCloud**, except that she keeps her clothing on. The film, released on Blu-ray by Warner as another *Archive Collection* Blu-ray (UPC#840418310830, \$23), can seem eccentric and even tiresome at first, but it is a lot easier going down than **O.C. and Stiggs**, and watching it again, when you know what to expect and what its parameters are, is a joy. Unfortunately, it was Altman's final film.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2:1. In part because it was shot in 2006 and in part because it was staged in a controlled environment, the picture is consistently smooth and sharp, with accurate, detailed hues. Altman's busy, multiple-track sound mix is fantastic on the 5.1-channel DTS track, especially when compared to the confined nature of his mix on the tracks of the other two discs. The sounds seem to leap about, and every tone is beautifully defined. There are optional English subtitles. We reviewed New Line's DVD in Dec 06 and the special features that it had are carried over, including a terrific commentary with Altman and Kline, 35 minutes of marvelous expanded musical footage, a great 49-minute production featurette and a trailer.

Periodically, Altman would augment his elaborately staged feature films with inexpensively staged renditions of important late Twentieth Century stageplays, and in 1986 he shot Christopher Durang's **Beyond Therapy** for New World Pictures, which is available on DVD from Anchor Bay Entertainment (UPC#013131222098, \$15). Durang and Altman collaborated on the script, and it has a great cast. Julie Hagerty and Jeff Goldblum are a New York couple who meet on a blind date through a magazine ad and have a falling out before the meal, at a French restaurant, even begins. Each goes to a therapist—hers is played by Tom Conti with an amusing Italian accent and his is played by Glenda Jackson (at another point, there is an unrelated but obviously self-aware reference to Jackson's performance in **Sunday Bloody Sunday**)—who happen to have offices next door to one another and periodically excuse themselves to perhaps make out in an adjoining room. Hagerty and Goldblum's characters inadvertently answer another ad and end up having another date together, which goes surprisingly well and, after another session with their therapists, she ends up visiting Goldblum's character at his apartment, where he lives with his male lover, played by Christopher Guest, who also attends therapy with Jackson's character. The therapists also begin to invade their lives. Even people who aren't freaked out by **O.C. and Stiggs** may find **Beyond Therapy** challenging. Although Durang honed the material on the stage, it was designed for a fairly specific audience, one that would not only catch many obscure cultural references, but also comprehend the dynamics of bisexuality and the humor of social awkwardness. Significant parts of the film are in French, without translation. The movie is blissfully free of poop gags, but the comedy is still eccentric and inconsistent, sending characters off on exaggerated tirades, and then winding back around to a genuinely funny moment or two before going off on another tangent.

Like these other films, the 93-minute feature plays better on multiple views, after you know what its limitations and wilder turns are and can focus instead on the carefully monitored but uninhibited performances and Altman's masterful sense of blocking and wonderful overlapping dialog. More

importantly, there is a surprising visual punchline at the very end that will make you want to jump back to the beginning and watch everything a second time, revealing how truly brilliant and challenging Altman's approach to the material turned out to be.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The picture transfer is adequate. There are a few scattered markings and the colors are not intense, but fleshtones are reasonably accurate. The monophonic sound is okay, and there is no captioning. Two trailers are included.

Byrne down in the house

David Byrne and eleven supporting musicians and vocalists perform wirelessly on a Broadway stage in what is as much a choreography as it is a concert, **David Byrne's American Utopia**, which was filmed by Spike Lee for Universal Pictures and has been released as a two-platter 4K Blu-ray by Universal and The Criterion Collection (UPC#715515326513, \$50). Even the drummers and the keyboardist are mobile, constantly moving around the stage with the others in precision groupings. They are all barefoot, too. For Byrne, who has to be getting up in years, it looks exhausting, but as the center of the 106-minute entertainment, he never has more than a moment's breather. Byrne has a kind of stranger-in-a-strange-land view of humanity, an almost autistic perspective, which in a way he himself admits to. During his introduction to one number, he explains, "About a year ago, we invited a high school choir in Detroit Michigan to an interpretation of this next song. The song's called *Everybody's Coming to My House*. In my version, it kind of sounds like the singer is not sure how he feels about everybody coming over to his house. Although he never says it in the song, you can sense that he's thinking, 'When are they gonna leave?'" In contrast, their version—and this was kind of a profound thing for me—they didn't change a single lyric. They didn't change the melody, and yet their version has a completely different meaning. Their version seems to be about welcome, inviting everyone over, inclusion. I kind of liked their version better [it plays during the end credits] and I didn't know how they did it. Unfortunately, I am what I am." The music his original band, The Talking Heads, played—so memorably captured in Jonathan Demme's **Stop Making Sense** (Jul 00)—had a sharper edge (Byrne performs one of those early songs, *Burning Down the House*, and it rouses the audience appropriately), but he has held onto the basic harmonies and intellectual explorations—one number is based upon a genuine Dadaist poem—and the show is always lively and guardedly enthusiastic, with enough energy and inventiveness to invite the interpretations of master filmmakers.

Lee is most certainly up to the task. The back and sides of the stage are squared off with hanging metal chains, like a beaded doorway, so that it is easy to have cameras behind them that, with the always creative lighting, cannot be seen from the front. A filmed concert breaks up the artifice the performers wish to impart as much as it celebrates it (one of the backup musicians is actually wearing discrete, flesh-colored slippers, although all of the others, and Byrne, are definitely barefoot), and that is what Lee brings to the production. By shifting angles and rhythms, the images constantly reinvigorate the performances and work as another counterpoint to what Byrne and his initial collaborators have already designed. There is even an overhead camera looking down on them, which is utterly appropriate for some of their Busby Berkeley-like formations. In the finale, there is a tribute to people killed in America because of their race, and Lee of course comes into his own in this moment, cutting away to present photos of them as Byrne names them off.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The color transfer is slick and precise. The 5.1-channel DTS sound is smooth, clear and enveloping. There is an audio track that describes the action, breathlessly, between the numbers ("Having stepped forward into more light boxes, they stand in a line near the front of the stage, freezing in varied poses as the music ends, David's hand raised to the ceiling and more boxes illuminating the floor to their sides and behind them. As the music changes, the stage grows dim and more musicians join them.") and optional English subtitles, which provide a welcome display of Byrne's stimulating lyrics.

The picture on the standard Blu-ray included in the set is almost as nice as the 4K image, but in a direct comparison it just isn't as sharp or as slick, impacting a viewer's concentration at least a tiny bit. The special features appearing on the standard BD do not start up where they left off if playback is terminated. There is a comprehensive 55-minute retrospective production featurette extensively going over the formation of the original stage show before moving on to explore Lee's involvement in staging the film; and a general exchange of affection in a 14-minute conversation between Byrne and Lee.

Byrne looks shockingly youthful in the 1986 Warner Bros. musical film that he directed and starred in, **True Stories**, which is available on Blu-ray from Warner and Criterion (UPC#715515223713, \$50). Since it is not directly a concert film, and Byrne was, to be honest, stretching the parameters of his capabilities a little, it is not as consistently engaging as the performance films he was involved with. Set in a fictional Texas town and shot in the suburbs of Dallas, its best parts are its musical and documentary components. There are several Talking Heads numbers (although again, none are particularly hard edged), and terrific footage of an actual community parade, as well as the 89-minute film's strongest sequence, a 'talent show' concert held on an 8½-style scaffolding stage lit at night in an otherwise empty field. The yodelers are terrific. But there is also a sense you cannot completely shake that Byrne is

making fun of the rubes. His character is kind of a narrator and interviewer, who drives into town and talks to characters about their jobs and their lives. John Goodman (in his first film), Spalding Gray and Swoosie Kurtz are among them, and the primary narrative arc sort of concerns the efforts Goodman's character is conducting to find a romantic partner. The film is eccentric enough that it has retained a cult following, not to mention a spot in The Criterion Collection, but Byrne (who doesn't use the right camera lens or angle during the talent show to completely catch the yo-yos) wisely went back to his familiar strengths—musical composition and performance—as can be seen in **American Utopia**, and left making movies to those who had more experience with the craft.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. Hues are very rich and bright, and fleshtones are accurate. The picture, however, is rather grainy and in need of an upgrade that would smooth things out a little. The 5.1-channel DTS sound has some pleasing separations and a strong dimensionality. There are optional English subtitles, a good 12-minute profile of art designer Tibor Kalman (he, "Understood the intersection of whimsy and strange ideas."); a very thorough and rewarding 64-minute retrospective documentary going over every aspect of how Byrne came to make the film, what he learned while doing it and what went on during the production; what is billed as a 32-minute retrospective piece visiting the locations and interviewing local people that plays like a collection of appealing deleted scenes, with music sequences, which is followed by another 14 minutes of actual deleted scenes; a genuine and sweet 12-minute retrospective visit to the film's locations; and a trailer.

Doris Day. Dig it.

A film that was so far ahead of its time the Fifties didn't deserve it, Charles Vidor's **Love Me or Leave Me**, a 1955 MGM biopic about Twenties singer Ruth Etting, features absolutely magnificent performances from Doris Day and James Cagney. The film is available on Blu-ray and has been incorporated in the Warner Bros. four-platter Blu-ray set, **4-Film Collection: Doris Day**, also known as *Doris Day Collection* (UPC#883929841011, \$40). Not only does each actor, individually, capture the essence of their respective character's emotional drives and confusions, but their depiction of a couple is even greater than the sum of its parts, conveying the dynamic unspoken torments of possession and obligation that continually surge through their relationship. Yes, Day does not imitate Etting's singing style, but she still delivers lovely, captivating renditions of the songs Etting made famous, so lovely that her homogenization of the music is never an issue, and she continues to act as she sings, suggesting the pressures and frustrations that her character must suppress when she performs. As for Cagney, while he has certainly been typecast as the gangster who mentors her career and then attempts to continue his control after she achieves fame, he does not play a general 'gangster' type—he plays a specific ruffian with specific idiosyncrasies, and he seems to completely lose himself in the part, as if you are watching the decay of the movie star himself rather than the outstanding power of his talent. They are from different ages, different backgrounds, different levels of experience and different skill sets, but Day and Cagney make a riveting screen couple, each one thriving off of the other's innate gifts. For the film's 122 minutes, they are spellbinding.

Cameron Mitchell plays a music director that Cagney's character eventually focuses his jealousy upon. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The color transfer is perfect. On a raised level of consideration, however, the presentation is a little soft and could welcome an increased sharpness now and then—the presentation still looks fantastic, but there is also some minor room for improvement. The 5.1-channel DTS sound reserves most of its dimensionality for the music numbers, but it has a pleasing smoothness and strength that reliably adds to the appeal of the presentation. There are optional English subtitles. We reviewed a DVD in Jul 09 and the special features have been carried over, including a trailer, a great 17-minute MGM Cinemascope promo film from 1955, *Salute to the Theaters*, and two wonderful black-and-white Etting *Vitaphone* shorts, *A Modern Cinderella* from 1932, running 17 minutes, and the 12-minute *Roseland* from 1930.

All of the Blu-rays in the set were released individually by Warner, and we reviewed another one of them, David Butler's **Lullaby of Broadway**, in Jan 22.

The romantic comedy plot has been used elsewhere, but what makes the 1948 **Romance on the High Seas** so exceptionally entertaining is in all likelihood the direction of Michael Curtiz, who not only presents Day in her very best light from beginning to end, but combines the delightful story with a steady progression of wonderful (and wonderfully shot) sets and costumes. A young wealthy married couple each believe that the spouse is unfaithful. The wife, played by Janis Paige, books a passage on a cruise ship but hires Day's character, a struggling singer, to pretend to be her so that she can surreptitiously watch her husband when he thinks she is out of town. The husband, played by Don DeFore, thinks the cruise sounds suspicious, so he hires a detective, played Jack Carson, to go on the cruise and keep an eye on his wife. Once they are away, Carson's character believes Day's character is the wife, but falls in love with her himself, just as she falls in love with him. The film builds to its farcical climax in Rio de Janeiro, but running 99 minutes, it sustains a basic level of delight from the very beginning, and then perks up even more once Day's character is introduced. You expect an actress to raise her game for a movie such as **Love Me or Leave Me**, but Day has fourth billing in **High Seas** and it is conceivably a cookie cutter part where all she has to do is seem perky, sing a few numbers

and—the greatest challenge of all—seem like she is in love with Carson. What is amazing, and quite probably a result of Curtiz's guidance, is the nuance that she brings to her performance, blending enthusiasm, vulnerability, confidence and hope. Her personality bubbles over, and then explodes whenever she sings a number, conveying feeling to the meaning of every lyric. She is magnetic.

The Blu-ray looks fantastic, as well. The designs have a multitude of color schemes, and each is solid and sharply delineated. Oscar Levant and S.Z. Sakall co-star, with Eric Blore appearing in one delicious scene as the ship's hypochondriac-prone doctor, and Franklin Pangborn. We reviewed a great looking DVD in Jul 09, but the additional accuracy of the BD playback is thrilling and makes the overall impact of the film all the greater. The monophonic sound is also stronger and smoother than the sound on the DVD. There are optional English subtitles. Carried over from the DVD is a trailer and an 11-minute 1948 black-and-white *Memories of Melody Lane* sing-along short entitled *Let's Sing a Song from the Movies*. The Tweety cartoon that appeared on the DVD, however, has been replaced with a 1947 *Merrie Melodies* Bugs Bunny cartoon running 7 minutes, *Hare Splitter*, in which he and a rival rabbit go courting the same lady rabbit.

Other than having produced the original stage production the film is based upon, MGM's 1962 circus movie, **Billy Rose's Jumbo**, has nothing whatsoever to do with Rose. Circus movies are a genre, but one of limited range (what was in all likelihood the greatest circus movie ever made, F.W. Murnau's *The Four Devils*, is, sadly, a lost film). Invariably, the plot has something to do with the circus having financial difficulties, which is then embellished by melodramatic conflicts among the characters and a display of genuine circus acts to pad out the plot. Directed by Charles Walters, the plot of **Jumbo** is especially thin, as it has just four primary characters—Jimmy Durante as the owner of the struggling circus, Day as his daughter, Martha Raye as a fortune teller and the love interest of Durante's character, and Stephen Boyd as an itinerant worker who seems to also be able to perform challenging high wire and acrobatic acts when they are needed—well, five if you count the elephant. There are other people milling about in the background, but their personalities are barely revealed. The film has songs—notably *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World* and *This Can't Be Love*—and a few dazzling acts, along with the humor that Durante and Raye provide and the romance between Day and Boyd's characters, but that is pretty much it. What's more, the final act of the 127-minute film (including an *Overture*) not only downshifts its pace, but after some story points are resolved, transitions to a lengthy impressionistic circus performance again featuring just the four principals, who then spend quite a bit of that time in clown makeup not being particularly funny. Overall, the actors do their part and the film's appeal rests with them, but not everyone will have patience for their antics or their attractiveness, while others will just lack the patience for the setting and circus movies as a whole.

We reviewed the DVD in Jul 09. The picture already looked good on that presentation, and the 5.1-channel sound had many terrific separation effects, but the Blu-ray rendition is even better. The image is sharper and hues are brighter, while the 5.1 DTS track has much stronger and crisper tones, giving the film the feel of a real, old-fashioned theatrical presentation. Along with optional English subtitles and a trailer, the disc carries over two special features from the DVD, a 1932 black-and-white MGM musical short running 20 minutes entitled *Yours Sincerely* and a 7-minute color MGM Tom and Jerry cartoon from 1951, *Jerry and Jumbo*.

What in effect is a 3-hour plus movie is broken into two parts with a sensible intermission with the release of the Warner *Archive Collection* Blu-rays of Warner's 1951 **On Moonlight Bay** (UPC#883929737109, \$23) and Warner's 1953 **By the Light of the Silvery Moon** (UPC#840418341261, \$25). Inspired by the writings of Booth Tarkington, the films are episodic and set in Middle America during the World War I era and its aftermath, but an equal inspiration to their creation is clearly Vincente Minnelli's **Meet Me in St. Louis** (Dec 25). Leon Ames is even imported from the latter to do virtually the same role he had in the other film, as the well meaning, upper middle class father who is not always in touch emotionally with the needs of his family. Rosemary DeCamp plays his wife, Mary Wickes does a clear Marjorie Main substitution as the family housekeeper, and Day, presented as tomboyish at first in both films, is the older daughter. In the only real shift, Billy Gray plays the younger, trouble-prone son, and they have no other siblings. Gordon MacRae is not the boy next door. Rather, he lives directly across the street.

Day is a fine entertainer who carries both films on the strength of her presence. She does not have the vulnerability that would make her character's dilemmas more touching and emotionally involving (which may have been what Curtiz guided her to in **Romance on the High Seas**), but she has such a command of the screen that you respond to the cues she sends you with her smiles, her frowns, her laughter and her anticipation. Her duets with MacRae are showstoppers because of the excitement in their harmonizing, and even if she seems older than her character, she is effectively matched with his maturity.

Both films purposefully convey seasonal nostalgia and both look totally gorgeous on the squared full screen presentations. The colors are precise and flesh tones are finely detailed, with the vividness of each setting adding deliberately to the atmosphere and its blend of memory and romance. If anything, **By the Light of the Silvery Moon** is even sharper and less grainy than **On Moonlight Bay**, but both presentations are beautiful. We reviewed DVDs of both releases in Jul 09, and while they looked reasonably nice, the smoothness and crispness of the BDs are a significant improvement, especially on **Silvery**

Moon. The monophonic sound is smooth on both features, and both are accompanied by optional English subtitles and a trailer.

Directed by Roy Del Ruth, **On Moonlight Bay** runs 95 minutes and is about Day's character first meeting and falling for MacRae's character, with the usual misunderstandings and such impacting their romance (he also gets under the skin of Ames's character for a while) until, at the film's end, he is called off to war. Gray's character sees a movie about alcoholism and fibs to his teacher that his father is abusive when he is caught daydreaming in class. He also pulls a number of other pranks that get on his father's nerves, until Ames's character must be reminded that he was a boy once, as well. The special features are carried over from the DVD, including a black-and-white Warner 1947 *Memories from Melody Lane* sing-along short running 9 minutes, entitled *Let's Sing a Song about the Moonlight*, and one of our favorite 7-minute color *Merrie Melodies* cartoons from 1950, the very funny *A Hound for Trouble*, about an American dog who lands in Italy.

Directed by Butler, **By the Light of the Silvery Moon** runs 102 minutes and begins with MacRae's character returning from the war safe and sound, only to have his wedding with Day's character delayed by the usual misunderstandings and complications. Gray's character steals a neighbor's turkey because he does not want to have his own pet slaughtered for Thanksgiving dinner, and later fantasizes that he is a detective, contributing to a misunderstanding about a note Ames's character, as part of his job, has written to a visiting actress, causing first his kids and then everyone in town to believe he is being unfaithful to DeCamp's character. Again, the supplement has been carried over from the DVD, including a 10-minute Warner black-and-white *Joe McDoakes* short from 1953 entitled *So You Want a Television Set* that has an appearance by Day and MacRae, another black-and-white *McDoakes* comedy short from 1953, running 11 minutes, entitled *So You Want to Learn to Dance*, and a 7-minute 1953 color *Merrie Melodies* cartoon entitled *From A to Z-Z-Z-Z* about a young boy daydreaming at school.

Day stars also stars in George Abbott and Stanley Donen's 1957 Warner Bros. adaptation of the stage musical, **Pajama Game**, which is part of the Warner **6-Film Collection: Broadway on the Big Screen** *Archive Collection* Blu-ray also known as *Broadway on the Big Screen Collection* (UPC#88392984-1196, \$60), and once again, her performance is magnetic. The show is built around union troubles in a pajama factory and the characters who aren't part of management are lower middle class workers. Day's hair is cropped scary short to give her a working class vibe, even though underneath it, she is still cute as a pajama button. Indeed, that is why her performance works so well. Everyone around her is shrill, but she still fits in, while at the same time she raises the appeal of the songs and the romance with the perfection of her delivery. Even though the 'company picnic' sequence is shot outdoors, and the shop floor is larger than a typical stage production would allow, the sets are designed to evoke a stage production—they even use a lot of neon—rather than trying to disguise anything as being real. John Raitt plays the manager who falls for her (and saves the day, so to speak, when the union is about to call a strike). Otherwise, the film is populated with character actors from the stage reprising their bits and Bob Fosse's inventive choreography, including a distinctive Fosse duet. Running 101 minutes, the film is cheery, with several memorable songs, creative choreography, and confection-like designs, but it is Day whose presence not only holds the movie's disparate bits together, but legitimizes their gathering.

Eddie Foy Jr., Carol Haney and Reta Shaw are also featured. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The lighting presents challenges at times to the cinematography—while it isn't Stanley Kubrick, part of the *Hernando's Hideaway* number is performed in total blackness with faces lit only by matches, or at least it is persuasively made to look that way—so the image often varies between being very sharp and being noticeably softer than that, although it is still so colorful that you don't mind the shifts. Hues are vivid and flesh tones are finely detailed. The monophonic sound is solid. Along with a trailer, Day's 3-minute deleted song number, *The Man Who Invented Love*, has been carried over from the DVD (Jul 09).

A Warner film that is naturally paired with **Pajama Game**, Abbott and Donen's 1958 **Damn Yankees**, does not feature Day but has the perfect amount of similarities—notably, Fosse's choreography—and differences to match the pleasures of the other film in an ideal manner without feeling redundant. Once again adapted from a stage musical, the production designs are less confined and, with a couple of sensible exceptions, more natural feeling, even when the film is not centered on baseball games in a genuine park. Ray Walston plays the Devil, tempting a middle-aged baseball fan by turning him into a star player, embodied by Tab Hunter after the transition. Although Hunter's character is pleased with his accomplishments, he remains pure of heart, so Walston's character then employs a temptress, played by Gwen Verdon, to seduce him into sealing the contract for his soul. That doesn't work, either. Shannon Bolin stars as the wife and Russ Brown is terrific as the team's manager, with Rae Allen as a reporter and Jean Stapleton in a decent-sized supporting part as one of the wife's friends. Running 100 minutes, the film gets so wrapped up in its plot that the musical numbers are spaced out a bit, but Walston's comedic performance more than compensates and there are several very nice tunes, including Verdon's signature number, *Whatever Lola Wants*. **Damn Yankees** works especially well when paired in proximity to **Pajama Game** because the films are uniquely downscale, no-nonsense musicals that focus on working class characters (the baseball world may be glamorous, but Hunter's character remains anchored to his real home). The enjoyments that each one has to offer add to an enthusiasm and appreciation

of what the other one delivers.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The colors are very sharp and fresh. You can see an optical coming a mile away because the image quality downshifts to accommodate it, particularly when Walston's character is up to no good, but that was the nature of the production. There is another dimly lit nightclub scene, too, which looks soft and impressionistic, but again, the effect feels intentional and unavoidable. The monophonic sound is solid and clear, and there are optional English subtitles, along with two trailers, including one that attempted to sell the film to baseball ignorant British audiences by calling it *What Lola Wants*.

The set also contains the Blu-ray releases of Ken Russell's outstanding **The Boy Friend**, which we reviewed in Oct 18, Joseph L. Mankiewicz's **Guys and Dolls**, which we reviewed in Jan 13, and Vincente Minnelli's **Brigadoon**, which we reviewed in Jul 22.

Lastly, Warner has also included Mervyn LeRoy's excellent 1962 Warner Bros. adaptation of **Gypsy**, with Rosalind Russell, Natalie Wood and Karl Malden. The Blu-ray is so old that the film does not start up where it left off if playback is terminated, but otherwise the color transfer is outstanding. The image is consistently sharp and precisely colored, with vivid details. The DTS stereo sound just has a basic dimensionality, but there are still some directional effects and the added sense of grandeur that the stereophonic orchestration brings to the music. Running 143 minutes, the story is of course adapted from the memoirs of Wood's character, Gypsy Rose Lee, and the efforts of her relentless mother to make stars of her and her sister when they were younger, during the Twenties and Thirties. Russell's performance is grand (and her final scenes with Wood are exquisitely touching), backed up by the infectious music from Jule Styne and the constantly inventive lyrics from Stephen Sondheim that make even the minor numbers quite delightful to sit through. Much of the story is set in the wings of stages, but the film holds onto the artificiality of its settings even during outdoor sequences, which on a meta-level conveys the sense that a backstage life is what the characters are living for. Not every viewer looks forward to spending so much time with Russell, particularly since her character is so pushy, but once she breaks into her biggest numbers, she delivers the songs with such unrestrained power and enthusiasm that all is readily forgiven.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. Along with optional English subtitles and a trailer, there are two deleted song numbers featuring Malden's rather lacking vocal skills, running a total of 6 minutes, which originally appeared in the DVD we reviewed in May 00.

Stewart collection

The Warner Home Video Blu-ray release of MGM's **How the West Was Won** (Nov 08) had two platters, one containing the film and the special features, and the second platter offering up the Cinerama movie in the wonderful curved screen 'SmileBox' format. Warner has now released that first platter—it even has a large '1' on the platter art—as part of their *Warner WB Archive Collection* four-platter Blu-ray release, **4-Film Collection: James Stewart**, also known as *James Stewart Collection* (UPC#883929843077, \$40). Also featured in the set is MGM's 1940 anti-Nazi feature, **The Mortal Storm**, which we reviewed on Blu-ray in Dec 20.

In **How the West Was Won**, Stewart played a character, yes, but in keeping with the film's mythic purposes, he also represented the good heart of America's foundation. In Anthony Mann's 1953 **The Naked Spur**, however, he is, for almost the entire movie, just an embittered grouch, with none of the charm or sense of innocence that normally made his characters—even the ones that cross over for a while to the dark side—endearing. Yes, his character probably was a good guy long before the film's story begins, at least that is what is established in the dialog, but he is an obsessed bounty hunter bent upon capturing a murderer played by Robert Ryan and bringing him back not so much for justice but for the reward, which he believes will help him buy back land he owned before the Civil War. Except for an Indian attack at one point, the MGM film just has three other characters—a prospector nicely played by Millard Mitchell who partners with Stewart's character to bring Ryan's character back; a discharged cavalry officer played by Ralph Meeker who also wants in on the deal; and the girlfriend of Ryan's character who has tagged along with him on the run, played by Janet Leigh. Shot amid glorious American mountain scenery (as we have pointed out in the past, Mann has a particular affection for the cinematic properties of physical heights), Ryan's character is captured early on and spends most of the movie playing the other characters against one another as he tries to wiggle out of his fate. As an ensemble piece, the 92-minute feature is very entertaining, with terrific action, gorgeous scenery and supporting players keeping the drama suspenseful and engaging. But while he may be the star, Stewart offers very little additional appeal. He is already burnt out at the beginning of the film, and while the movie intends to show his redemption, that doesn't really happen until the last few frames, so otherwise you are just stuck on the trail with an actor whom Mann already had overplaying his part in the first scene and given no respite during the rest of the film. He also gets shot in the leg, but a couple of weeks later he's climbing up a rock face and only remembering to limp once he reaches its crest.

The squared full screen picture looks beautiful. It is a vast improvement over the DVD we reviewed in Sep 06. Not only are the colors consistently accurate, but the picture is always sharp and even the darkest sequences have clearly delineated details. It is indeed the beauty of the images that makes the BD play better than the DVD did. You have more patience for the

film and for Stewart because in the background is one captivating shot of pristine American wilderness after another. The monophonic sound is also strong and clear, bringing more attention to Bronislaw Kaper's lovely music. There are optional English subtitles, a trailer and the two MGM shorts that were included on the DVD, the 9-minute black-and-white 1953 Pete Smith piece called *Things We Can Do Without*, and the 7-minute Tex Avery color cartoon from 1952 called *Little Johnny Jet*.

Probably our favorite Christmas movie of all, featuring what is definitely one of Stewart's most endearing performances, the set is rounded out with Ernst Lubitsch's classic 1940 MGM romantic comedy, **The Shop around the Corner**. Margaret Sullavan is top billed as the store clerk who has fallen in love with an anonymous penpal not realizing that it is actually another clerk in the store, played by Stewart, who also doesn't know her identity, either, at least at first. The story begins in summertime, but it concludes on Christmas Eve and despite the admittedly unkind tricks that Stewart's character plays on her after he finds out who she really is, the film is a joyous blend of humor, romance and atmosphere (it is set in Budapest, to give it a little exotic flavor). Frank Morgan does a lovely job as the store owner, and Lubitsch stalwart Felix Bressart has a nice supporting part as another clerk. The narrative has been imitated a number of times, but the comedy and rich characterizations that Lubitsch and the cast bring to every scene makes the entire 99-minute film a delight not just to watch, but to share with anyone that you love (or would like to love).

The DVD we reviewed in Dec 02 looked fine, but it did have pervasive speckling that has been completely eliminated on the terrific looking Blu-ray. The squared full screen black-and-white image is consistently sharp and finely detailed, increasing a viewer's concentration and delight all the more. The monophonic sound is okay and there are optional English subtitles. Warner has carried over the trailer (which features both Morgan speaking to the viewer and Lubitsch) and an 11-minute 1940 promotional short entitled *The Miracle of Sound*. Furthermore, two radio adaptations of the film have been added, a *Gulf Screen Guild Theater* 30-minute abridged adaptation from 1940 with Sullavan and Stewart, with Morgan providing narration to get the story up to speed and then Sullavan and Stewart providing adept, vocally expressive renditions of their best scenes; and a full 60-minute *Lux Radio Theatre* presentation from 1941 with Claudette Colbert and Don Ameche, and Bressart reprising his part, hosted by Cecil B. DeMille (Bea Benaderet also has a bit part). Ameche is functional in his part, but Colbert is distinctive, and while her voice is more forceful, her charms are equal in her own way to what Sullavan brought to the role in her radio outing.

Life around the world

The Criterion Collection series gathering lesser known films from every corner of the globe, **Martin Scorsese's World Cinema Project**, not only introduces viewers to film artists and movies otherwise unheard of or unseen in America, but it provides a showcase for alternative ways of life around the world. Having the depictions of how people live in different parts of the world—and in different eras—gathered for contrast in one boxed set enhances a viewer's appreciation of the diversity, struggle and beauty of human life on Earth. The previous releases have contained both DVD platters and Blu-ray platters, but **Martin Scorsese's World Cinema Project No. 5** (UPC#715515327213, \$100) presents four films on just three Blu-ray platters alone. All of the films have brief introductions by Scorsese, lauding the efforts that went into restoring each one, and all of the films have optional English subtitling. The films begin where they left off if playback is terminated, but the supplements do not.

An impressively staged depiction of the struggle for Algerian independence, nearly an hour passes in Mohamed Lakhdar-Hamina's 178-minute *Chronicle of the Years of Fire* before the story's time period is identified—at that point, it is before World War II, although the film continues into the War and afterward—and that first part could be taking place in any era. The 1975 film begins with a farmer and his family trying to survive along with the rest of his community during a severe drought. He eventually moves them to a city, only to face a typhus epidemic and quarantine, followed by the separations that the War causes, and then afterwards, the oppression of colonialism. Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1, Lakhdar-Hamina uses the widescreen framing effectively to set up sequential tableaux depicting a town, a field, etc. Then, it is as the protagonist, played by Yorgo Voyagis, moves through those tableaux, interacting with the land or his neighbors, that the plot advances, as if he is the plot, himself. The staging of each sequence is fascinating, and is greatly aided by the lovely color picture transfer that clarifies every detail. Obviously, the film is episodic, and explores the economic and emotional cost of colonial exploitation, but there is a greater accomplishment in its staging and structure. On the one hand, the budget is so limited that the editing often cuts away from seemingly important or showy moments, but on the other, the way in which Lakhdar-Hamina manages to share such a comprehensive emotional history of the Algerian experience in the first half of the Twentieth Century almost entirely through isolation and tapestry is a demonstration of the seemingly limitless power of motion pictures. Frankly, the experience of watching the highly enjoyable Michael Curtiz feature, **Romance on the High Seas**, a formulaic Hollywood production executed by one of the great masters of the craft, in the afternoon, and then watching the completely opposite but equally spellbinding *Years of Fire* in the evening enhances not just an appreciation of the films themselves, but a profound respect and spiritual satisfaction for the breadth of possibility and achievement that cinema can provide.

In Scorsese's 4-minute introduction, he compares the film to **Battle**

for **Algiers**—for all intents and purposes, *Years of Fire* works as a prequel—and points out that both films had the same cinematographer, Marcello Gatti. He also notes that Lakhdar-Hamina has a major part in the movie, as a sort of crazy, isolated gravedigger who also serves as an audience surrogate. Also featured is a very good 24-minute overview of Lakhdar-Hamina's career and deconstruction of the film's narrative as it relates to actual events.

And again in another opposite, Idrissa Ouédraogo's *Yam Daabo*, the first film on the second platter, is a beautifully simple, directly told story of two families living and farming remotely in the African bush. One young man is jealous because the girl in the other family has a boyfriend, and his confrontations integrate suspense with the couple's romance. The basic plot lasts little over an hour, but the 80-minute film then has a nice epilog to fill out its running time, although there is also a bookending piece that has a touch of political awareness. Presented in a squared full screen format, the 1987 film's simplicity is its joy, depicting the lives of the characters, their manner of subsistence, their sorrows and their happiness.

The picture transfer is excellent. While the production environment is a little rough, it does not seem that the presentation could look any fresher than it does. The monophonic sound is okay, and there is a viable jazz score by Francis Bebey. Shot in Burkina Faso, the film is in Mooré and French. Scorsese's introduction lasts 4 minutes ("The elements of the story are familiar from classic melodramas, but the quiet of the picture, the way it unfolds so serenely, is what makes it so unusual."), and there is an informative 22-minute profile of Ouédraogo's career and appreciation of the film.

While anchored in the same realities as *Yam Daabo*, musical and fantasy elements are present in G. Aravindan's *Kummatty*, the second film on the platter, which is set in a substantially more populated rural community in Southwestern India. It takes nearly half of the 90-minute film for a narrative to manifest, and describing that narrative in too much detail would spoil its surprises, but essentially, the film is told from the eyes of the children who live there. They attend a relatively sophisticated elementary classroom, but spend their free hours in a world more aligned with folktales and magic. When an elderly wanderer passes through their community, the kids are fascinated by him, until something happens. Throughout the film, in an acknowledgment of Indian cinema traditions, folk music is heard in the background, as if it is being sung by unseen characters going about their daily business. Again, the film creates a compelling portrait of what to most viewers is an exotic community, and while the film is ultimately not as satisfying as *Yam Daabo*, it is a worthwhile companion program.

Presented in a squared, full screen format, the image quality is in decent condition overall, with bright hues, although there is a mild softness a lot of the time, and a few stray scratches. The film is in Malayalam, but there is a segment in English and while it is perfectly understandable, the subtitles are still present. Scorsese's introduction runs 4 minutes, and there is a good 24-minute overview of Aravindan's career and the film, which also demonstrates how refreshing the movie's restoration is in comparison to how it usually looked beforehand.

The final film on the final platter is another ambitious historical epic by a filmmaker interpreting his heritage, this time in Kazakhstan, Ardak Amirkulov's 157-minute *The Fall of Otrar*. Set in the Thirteenth Century, it depicts the eventual invasion of the city by Genghis Khan, and it will take at least two viewings to understand who the primary characters are and which side they are on. One character is essentially a spy, played by Dokhdurbek Kydyraliyev, who returns after spending a number of years with Khan to warn the city that they are on the invasion list. Not everyone wants to hear about it. The film gradually transitions its attention to one of the town's leaders, played by Tunyshbai Dzhambankulov, following his successes in battles and, for a longer while than Khan would have liked, his able defense of the town. The spy, however, does not disappear from the story entirely, and shows up again at the very end. Bolot Beyshenaliyev plays Khan. The 1991 film has clear allusions to the Soviet Union, which was falling apart as the film was being put together. It is also exceedingly violent, constantly dwelling on killings and torture, and horses are treated in Old Hollywood fashion. The protagonist in *Chronicle of the Years of Fire* was a likeable guy and his charisma is what pulls the viewer through the film's extended, historical storytelling. Nobody in *Otrar* is especially likeable, and the film's macho depiction of bullies endlessly in conflict with other bullies will be a turn off for many viewers. It is an impressive production, with elaborate battle sequences, striking locations and compelling image compositions. Indeed, one of the reasons the movie's violence is so discomfiting is that the feature has been staged so competently. The film is presented in a squared full screen format, and most of it is in black and white with a sepia tint, which is reasonably sharp and free of any hint of wear. There are also passages in color, however, and the vivid hues in these sequences are exhilarating. The monophonic sound is strong and clear, although the dialog recording is a little muffled at times. The film is in Kazakh, Mongolian and Mandarin, although the latter is often not translated. Along with the 5-minute Scorsese intro, there is a terrific 24-minute collection of retrospective interviews, including Amirkulov's recollections, describing the film's creation and intent.

Brazilian breakthrough

Let's face it. Some groundbreaking films are tedious. Unless you are steeped in the ins and outs of the French New Wave, for example, **Breathless** can seem to be a real drag, and unless you are equally enamored with the parallel

wave of moviemaking that arose in Brazil during the same time period, known as Cinema Novo, then one of its cornerstone breakthrough features, Glauber Rocha's 1964 **Black God, White Devil** (*Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol*), a two-platter Criterion Collection Blu-ray (UPC#715515299114, \$40), will also have you on the verge of slumber. Appearing to have utilized every last frame of the 121-minute film that he shot, Rocha has endless scenes of characters running back and forth in the landscape, or facing one another and dithering. There is a lot of dithering. Some directors will embrace their errors when a film does not succeed, but Rocha is the sort who doubles down and claims that the filmmaking and critical establishment are against him, and that no one understands his masterpiece. In reality, the film has a couple of good ideas, a little bit of potential here and there—Rocha would later spinoff one of the characters into a better and more successful feature—but required much tighter discipline and planning in its inception than Rocha was willing to accommodate.

Reacting to economic oppression, a Brazilian peasant in the hinterland, played by Geraldo Del Rey, begins following the cult of a black preacher, played by Lidio Silva. Rocha makes particular use of one striking location, a hill so tall in the middle of endless flatlands that it looks almost like a mountain, and has a gradually terraced pathway winding all the way to the top. Rocha shoots it from above (as if the characters were in the clouds) and below, and that part is terrific, but he also shoots Del Rey in a 5-minute sequence lifting and dropping, lifting again and dropping again, a genuinely heavy brick-like boulder that he struggles to carry up the hill at the urging of Silva's character. That is just one example of the film's many repetitive and aimless scenes that go on and on and amount to nothing. Indeed, the sequence is even emblematic of the film as a whole, and perhaps the story can be read as symbolic of filmmaking itself, beginning in idealism, moving on to drudgery and concluding in a massacre. Silva's character is killed in the film's exact middle, and Del Rey's character then joins the gang of a bandit played by Othon Bastos. But even when the film shifts to the bandits, it is still primarily about them standing around or wandering around and not doing much, while the character that Rocha would later spinoff ("Antonio das Mortes"), played by Mauricio do Valle, tracks them down. The film has a slapdash look and tone, and barely holds together, although it is accompanied by an epic, partially choral musical score by Brazilian classicist Heitor Villa-Lobos.

The squared full screen black-and-white film appears on the first platter. The film was clearly shot on an impoverished budget, but the transfer of the source material is meticulous, so that while the image is grainy or focus-challenged on occasions, it still looks crisp and finely detailed, and the sequences that were shot under more favorable conditions look lovely. The monophonic sound has also been resurrected with care, despite the limitations to its dynamic range and other limitations that can be attributed to its original recording. The film is in Portuguese with optional English subtitles, and comes with a trailer.

There is also an amazing 29-minute black-and-white documentary from 1964, *Memória do Cangaço*, about the battles between the bandits and the police in the late Thirties, with incredible footage from the Thirties of the bandits and later interviews with the police about the methodical efforts to combat the marauders, including one who shares displays of the actual heads of the bandits that he keeps in his study, and interviews with the widows and other survivors. An excellent 22-minute piece about the bandits, the Brazilian Cinema Novo and **Black God, White Devil** ties everything together.

The producer of the film's restoration, Lino Meireles, provides a passable commentary track, explaining the film's impact on the Brazilian film industry and deconstructing the narrative as it proceeds, while also talking a bit about the film's production history and what happened after it was released. "Glauber's film, you know, goes for operatic moments. This is what sets it apart, what he made that was new in Brazilian cinema. It's the foundational rock of national cinema. This film changed things."

A pair of documentaries about Rocha and Brazilian cinema appear on the second platter, adding to the value of the set as a whole. The film begins where it left off when playback is terminated, but on the second platter, the two documentaries do not (nor do the supplements on the first platter). Both documentaries are also in Portuguese with optional English subtitles, and both have aggressive stereo soundtracks (including a very impressive helicopter flyby).

The first documentary, *Glauber the Movie, Labyrinth of Brazil*, is a 98-minute profile of Rocha from 2003. In our Mar 24 review of a collection of films by José Mojica Marins, we suggested that the inclusion of footage from Marins's funeral in one of the supplements, which had images of Marins in his coffin, was unique to home video, and while technically we remain correct since Criterion's release is promoting the film and not the filmmaker, there does appear to be a thing about Brazil and filmmakers in open caskets, because there is a lot of footage of Rocha, who passed away in his early forties, in an open coffin mobbed by mourners, as if he were a rock star or a silent film idol. The program includes reminiscences from many of those who worked with him, as well as his fellow filmmakers and other artists from the era, all of whom hobnobbed together quite a bit (although there is never any mention of Marins, who was, steadfastly, even more independently minded than Rocha). Clips from Rocha's films are included, as well, and **Black God, White Devil** was not the only one of his movies to challenge the patience of his followers. While the program is a bit scattershot, it shares plenty of footage of Rocha himself, so that the viewer can get a feel for his bad boy personality and energy, and lament that his life and career were cut so short.

The second documentary, *Cinema Novo*, from 2016, is about the entire

gang of filmmakers who eagerly fed off of one another until a military coup in the mid-Sixties put a damper on the party. Running 92 minutes, the film opens and closes with footage from **Black God, White Devil** and in addition to capturing the personalities of the filmmakers and exploring the atmosphere that led to their creativity, it also looks at the specific Brazilian ingredients—the diverse landscapes, the weighted influence of the coastal cities, the economic inequalities—that made the films unique. There are many, many movie clips, although their identifications are held for the closing credit scroll. This documentary doesn't mention *Marins*, either.

One for all

Two of the most cynical motion picture artists who ever conspired together, director Richard Lester and screenwriter George MacDonald Fraser, collaborated upon one of the most joyful, effervescent period action comedies ever conceived, the 1973 **The Three Musketeers**, but the movie was too popular and they couldn't leave well enough alone, so in 1974 they put together a sequel (the film was originally intended and mostly shot as a longer road show event, and was only broken up when the filmmakers couldn't make their initial release deadline) that revealed the true nature of their souls, **The Four Musketeers**. The second film was, deservedly, much less successful. Although mostly true to the original, darker vector of the Alexander Dumas novel, the death particularly of Raquel Welch's character at the second film's climax was an utter betrayal to the first film's fans, and cast pallor over the entire endeavor. Individually, each film has many inventive and witty stunts, along with more elaborate and complex stunt sequences, and Lester's approach to humor, allowing funny things to happen in an offhand manner and not necessarily in the central focus of a shot, guarantees that you will miss gags and even extremely funny moments the first time through. Contrary to swashbucklers in the past, the film embraces the idea that olden days were filled with filth and malfunctioning devices. The heroes, involved with the nobility, pay no attention to the common people whatsoever. Nobody does, and one of the most profoundly funny ideas in the film is that the poor sobs who are actually trying to make a living or earn money for their families are constantly inconvenienced or otherwise see their livelihoods impacted by the uncaring noble oafs who are going about their own business and concerned about nothing else. What is wonderful about the first film, as we have said in the past, is that at its end, no one is dead, neither the heroes nor the villains. It is inevitably all downhill from there.

Nevertheless, Janus Films, StudioCanal and The Criterion Collection have released 4K presentations of both movies in a single four-platter Blu-ray set, **The Three Musketeers/The Four Musketeers** (UPC#715515313810, \$70). The first film runs 107 minutes and the second film runs 106 minutes, with Michael York as the central character, the young swordsman who hopes to join an elite squad made up of veteran swordsmen played by Oliver Reed, Frank Finlay and Richard Chamberlain. Geraldine Chaplin plays the queen and Welch plays her dress maid, who attracts the affections of York's character. Charlton Heston does a lovely turn as the scheming cardinal who runs the palace, Christopher Lee is his wicked henchman, and Faye Dunaway is the henchman's equally wicked mistress. Jean-Pierre Cassel, Simon Ward, Sybil Danning, and Roy Kinnear are also featured, with Spike Milligan and Joss Ackland showing up in the first film. In the first film, there is a plot to embarrass the queen by stealing her diamonds from her lover, while the narrative in the second film involves a siege upon a castle and the vengeance sought by the villains for the achievements of the heroes in the earlier film.

The films are letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The image on **Three Musketeers** is a little soft at times, but the 4K presentation is much stronger than the standard BD presentation included in the set, which is over saturated and creates pinkish fleshstones. The image on **Four Musketeers** is much sharper, although again, the color on the 4K presentation is precise, while the colors on the standard BD are not as detailed or as engaging. Michel Legrand wrote the musical score for **Three Musketeers**, but there was another shift in gears to a less flowery score in **Four Musketeers** by Lalo Schiffrin. The monophonic sound on both presentations is adequately presented, and there are optional English subtitles.

The special features do not start up where they left off is playback is terminated. The standard BDs each come with a trailer. The first film also has a good 7-minute original production featurette. Two additional programs provide a comprehensive and highly satisfying retrospective looks at the creation of both features. Each is split across the two platters. One, running a total of 48 minutes, was originally produced by Blue Underground and Anchor Bay Entertainment, and contains extensive interviews with many of the cast and crew members. The second program does not have lengthy interviews with the stars, but runs a whopping 141 minutes as it works its way chronologically and minutely through the story of the production, going into rewarding detail not only about every moment that appears on the screen, but the talent of each contributing artist. When stories conflict over what occurred, every version is shared. Breaking down one stunt in which Kinnear falls from a horse (it was an accident that they left in the movie), it is also pointed out that Kinnear died from injuries sustained in an accident on another, largely forgotten sequel Lester directed, and that Lester never made another fiction film after the incident. It is pointed out, as well, during a segment on shooting a highly amusing scene where Milligan's character tries to load a pistol, that while they were called 'Musketeers,' guns were very awkward weapons in the day, and that is why they relied mostly upon their swords.

Suspicion

We love architect characters in movies because they build houses that would be totally impractical in real life, but look incredible on the screen, and that is what Robert Young's character has done in **The Second Woman**, a terrific 1950 United Artists psychological thriller released by Film Masters as an *Archive Collection* Blu-ray (UPC#840418322093, \$22). His house sits prominently on a rocky rise leading to a point at the beach (it was shot at Big Sur), so that when the characters are in his living room, there are large plate glass windows with ocean views, in both directions. It is so awesome. Betsy Drake is the niece of one of his neighbors who meets him on a train traveling back from a larger city and begins seeing him casually. His wife was killed in an automobile accident a short time previously—all of this is being told in flashback since the movie actually opens with his character apparently attempting to commit suicide in a garage—and while he is personable and enthusiastic in the company of Drake's character, he also drifts off from time to time, and bad things seem to be happening around him, first with his pets and eventually with that lovely house being burned to the ground. Is he crazy? What were the actual circumstances regarding his previous wife's death? Fortunately, Drake's character trusts her instincts. Directed by James V. Kern and running 91 minutes, the story has plenty of twists to keep things interesting, and the performances are fine, although we must say that even now, long after his own TV show concluded and the commercials that he made as a spinoff have been forgotten, we still find it amusing when Young's character goes to a doctor to ask for advice about his health.

The film does not start up where it left off if playback is terminated. The squared full screen black-and-white picture is in very nice shape all things considered. The image is consistently soft, but wear is barely noticeable, there are no more than a couple of splices, and details are reasonably clear. The monophonic sound is also a bit on the soft side, but it is adequate, and the musical score makes extensive use of themes from Tchaikovsky. There are optional English subtitles.

Wharf extortion

Based upon a stageplay by Irwin Shaw, Anatole Litvak's 1941 Warner Bros. feature, **Out of the Fog**, is as much one of Shaw's male soap operas as it is a crime film. Although Ida Lupino and John Garfield are top billed, Thomas Mitchell and John Qualen are the central characters, two storeowners in Brooklyn's Sheepshead Bay who spend much of their time fishing. Garfield is an extortionist demanding a weekly payment or he will sink their boat, and Lupino is the daughter of Mitchell's character, who is torn between Garfield's character and her weak willed boyfriend played by Eddie Albert. George Tobias and Leo Gorcey are also featured. Released on Blu-ray by Warner as a *Warner WB Archive Collection* title (UPC#840418304358, \$25), the film runs 85 minutes and is primarily about the Mitchell and Qualen characters fretting over what they will do. Garfield has a commanding presence when he appears, in contrast not just to the other characters but to the entire environment, and Lupino very effectively bridges the two worlds, both repelled and attracted to Garfield's spiel. Still, the film feels like two different movies when Garfield is there and when he is not, and it is that second movie that takes up much of the film's running time.

The squared full screen black-and-white picture transfer is an adept presentation of the often fogbound James Wong Howe cinematography (and even when they are inside, there is either smoke from cigarettes, or a rather odd, extended steam room sequence where Mitchell and Qualen's characters plot and plan in one corner while the flabby, bare chested Tobias gets a massage in the other corner). The image may celebrate the haze, but it is accurately rendered, to the point where the picture is so sharp that Garfield seems like he is more in focus than anybody else. The monophonic sound is fine and there are optional English subtitles, along with a trailer and two color 1941 Warner *Merric Melodies* cartoons, the 8-minute *Hollywood Steps Out* (characterizations of movie stars attending a ritzy nightclub) and the 7-minute 1941 *The Heckling Hare* (an early version of Bugs Bunny in the woods, frustrating a hunting dog).

Death in the apple tree

A 1939 MGM film so disturbing it appears to promote suicide, **On Borrowed Time**, has been released on Blu-ray by Warner Bros. as a *Warner WB Archive Collection* Blu-ray (UPC#840418335086, \$25). Cedric Hardwicke plays Death and through a convoluted piece of magical logic, Lionel Barrymore, playing the grandfather of a young boy whose parents Death has recently taken, tricks Death into climbing an apple tree, where he becomes trapped. In order for a devious aunt to become the boy's guardian (to grab his estate), she has to persuade the authorities that Barrymore's character is loony. The film runs 99 minutes and it alternates between being unbearably saccharine and stunningly cold blooded. The 1934 *Death Takes a Holiday* (Jul 01) managed to use the same kind of fantasy (in *Time*, while Death is stuck in the tree, nobody in the world dies) to create a romantic drama that compensated for its darker shadings with a poetic maturity that allowed the viewer to step back and appreciate its sentiments. This, on the other hand, is ostensibly a family film, which not only sanctifies giving up the will to live, but encourages taking the life of a handicapped loved one at the same time. It is wild stuff that some viewers will appreciate simply for how outside of the norm it dares to be, while others will find it too sappy and ridiculous to waste their time with. Directed by Clarence Brown, a young Una Merkel costars with Beulah Bondi, Henry Travers, Nat Pendleton, Grant Mitchell and the villainous Eily Malyon.

The black-and-white picture is presented in a squared full screen format and looks terrific. The image is sharp and free of distortion. The monophonic sound is fine, and there are optional English subtitles. Barrymore stars with the welcome voices of Agnes Moorehead and Vincent Price in a *Screen Guild Theater* radio adaptation from 1946 running 30 minutes. A harsher *Great Scenes from Great Plays* radio adaptation from 1948 of the stageplay also runs 26 minutes with the very welcome voice of Boris Karloff (in the Hardwicke/Price part) and no other recognizable stars. Also featured is a nice looking 10-minute color MGM 1939 James A. Fitzpatrick *Traveltalks* shorts visiting San Francisco entitled *A Day on Treasure Island*, looking at the various pavilions in The Golden Gate International Exposition, an 8-minute black-and-white MGM *Count Screwloose and J.R. The Wonder Dog* cartoon with wobbly sound, *Wanted: No Master* (the dog tricks his master into marrying a homely woman but the plot backfires; there are also several frowned upon black caricatures), and a trailer.

We hope nobody lost a pinky over this

Fans of Japanese gangster films will but utterly aghast, but Nineties action film enthusiasts will likely enjoy *American Yakuza*, an Arrow Video Blu-ray (UPC#760137199977, \$40). Well before he became famous, a youthful Viggo Mortensen was top billed in the 1993 Frank A. Cappello feature, shot in Los Angeles, about a worker in an import company warehouse who saves the life of the Japanese owner, played by Ryo Ishibashi, from a mob hit, and eventually becomes a member of the yakuza gang that the American mobsters want to eliminate. Michael Nouri is also featured as the primary mobster. Running 95 minutes, the narrative has a few twists to keep things interesting, and the gunfight sequences are suitably exhilarating (as opposed to the opening and closing segments of the film, which are sleepy in comparison to its middle). Anyone with even a minimal motion picture exposure to the ways of the yakuza will cringe at how detached from tradition the American-Japanese co-production is, but unless you have an actual tattoo of a dragon covering your entire back, you probably won't care.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. Keeping in mind that this is one of those cheap Nineties action films, the cinematography and production designs may be a little slapdash, but the actual image transfer appears to be quite nice. It is always stable and as sharp as is possible, and colors are fresh. One of our favorite aspects of the Nineties was the now forgotten 'Ultra-Stereo' sound processing, which made cheap films like this sound as grand as big Hollywood productions, at least on laser discs, and it delivers here, as well, with marvelous directional effects and plenty of energy. There are optional English subtitles.

Cappello delivers an excellent, enthusiastic 13-minute talk about how and why he got into filmmaking and how he came to make the movie (which he says was more popular in Japan than Ridley Scott's *Black Rain*). Also featured is a fantastic 2024 interview with Mortensen running 38 minutes and speaking specifically about shooting *American Yakuza* ("I remember that summer I felt fortunate just to have a job, make a little bit of money. I didn't expect much out of it other than that.") and how his greatest reward from the film was the lifelong friendship he formed with Ishibashi, followed by talking about many of his experiences before fame enabled him to work full time as an actor (he could not afford to take a part in Jane Campion's *Portrait of a Lady* until he managed to swing a secondary role in *Daylight*, which was shooting at the very same time in Italy, allowing him to commute between the two productions); a very nice 11-minute interview with Ishibashi about making the movie (and his lifelong friendship with Mortensen that came from it); a trailer; and a small collection of color stills. Cappello also sits with costar Anzu Lawson for an entertaining commentary, as they share their memories of the shoot and the staging of the individual scenes as they appear (Mortensen almost drops Ishibashi as he is carrying him down a stairwell for real). They also talk a lot about the other stars (Lawson was scared of Nouri) and about the film business in general.

Classy Japanese action

The irresistibly titled *Revolver Lily*, released on Blu-ray by Well Go USA Entertainment (UPC#810199990316, \$30), is a 2023 Japanese production set in the Twenties that has the feel of a manga action thriller. Haruka Ayase plays the highly skilled title character, who is riding on a train when she sees a group of military thugs apprehend a young boy. She rescues the boy, they escape from the moving train and are pursued. Directed by Isao Yukisada, the film runs an impressive 137 minutes and sustains a classy and elegant tone that is periodically punctuated with elaborate gunfights. Although he did not know what she looked like, the boy was actually riding the train to find her in the city after the rest of his family was slaughtered, and he holds the key to an enormous amount of money that was embezzled from the army by naval intelligence. Yes, it is another effort by Japanese filmmakers to mitigate their past—the Navy heroes are trying to at least stall the advance of militarism within Japan that the Army villains are striving for, in order to 'prepare' Japan to survive the disaster it will bring—but its mix of period dressings (the trains alone are wonderful, and the street scenes are just as lovely), blood-splattering action and personable characters do indeed make the film difficult to resist. Ayase never looks out of place, even tramping through the woods in a dress and pearls, and if you were in trouble, you would want to run to her as well.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1, and is consistently glossy and sharp. Even the elaborate chase and gunfight at the climax, set at night in streets laden with an extremely dense fog, is clear and

undistorted. The 5.1-channel DTS sound has a lovely dimensionality and sharp tones. The film is in Japanese with optional English subtitles and is accompanied by a trailer.

Chow becomes a beggar

The brash but spoiled son of a general goes to a whorehouse and sees a woman there that he wants. She is actually an assassin, however, meant to tempt a high official when he isn't paying attention. The young man, played by Stephen Chow, gets into a bidding war over her with the official and ends up spoiling the assassination attempt, although his persistence does cause the girl to fall in love with him. That is just the start of the 1992 Golden Harvest production, *King of Beggars*, released on Blu-ray by Eureka! (UPC#76013720-1076, \$40). Both he and his father are eventually stripped of their wealth and condemned to be beggars. He gradually improves his fighting skills, rises in status—at least among the beggars—and reunites with the girl to save the emperor, but only after many trials and tribulations. Directed by Gordon Chan, the 101-minute film has a few comedic scenes of cultural slapstick that not everyone will appreciate, but the fights—and battles—make the incidental humor worth tolerating. The fighting is especially vigorous and dazzling, and is integrated with the comedy, as well, with Chow's character, after he becomes proficient, pretending to be lazy and even sleeping, but still parrying every move his opponents make.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1, and the image transfer is excellent, with bright, sharp hues and vivid contrasts. Even when the villains whip up a poisonous fog, the picture remains crisp. The film is stereophonic, in Cantonese with optional English subtitles, and contains a lively separation mix. There is also an alternate English track, a trailer, a good 18-minute interview with Chan about how he developed the film and how it became a success ("The reason I chose to not work with Stephen Chow again after making *King of Beggars* was because I knew next time he would be the boss and I didn't want us to end up fighting. Because of that decision, I am still good friends with Stephen!"), and a decent 31-minute analysis of Chow's career and the film's construction.

Hong Kong film expert Frank Djeng supplies a commentary, going over the movie's production history and how it was one of the films that skyrocketed Chow's popularity. He also talks about the efforts of the other members of the cast and crew, explains the cultural nuances in the plot and the familiarity theatergoers would have with the story, and underscores that the movie was as popular for its comedy as it was for its action. "I remember everyone in the Hong Kong theater that I saw this, they were in stitches, they were laughing so hard."

Macao gangsters

A 1987 Golden Harvest gangster buddy movie written by Kar-wai Wong and directed by Joe Cheung, *Flaming Brothers*, has been released on Blu-ray by Eureka! (UPC#760137206453, \$30). Alan Tang and Yun-fat Chow are lifelong friends who work their way up the ranks in the Macao mob until they each meet a woman and go their separate ways. It takes the main gangster and villain to bring them back together again. While the film takes a different path than *Borsalino* (Sep 23), the filmmakers were clearly influenced in terms of style and attitude, and the leads, in particular, convey a comfortable familiarity that creates sympathy for their efforts. Running 102 minutes, the narrative is straightforward and supplies an effective mix of romance and violence, with each shootout out being grander and bloodier than the one before.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The color transfer is reasonably smooth most of the time, and the monophonic sound is clear. The film is in Cantonese with optional English subtitles, and comes with an alternate English language track.

Hong Kong film experts Mike Leeder and Arne Venema supply an enthusiastic commentary track ("The squibs and the violence are my favorite thing about this film. I mean it's got its drama, but..."), going into the careers and talents of the cast and crew, talking about the locations, and discussing in detail the film's gangster buddy subgenre that was just getting started in the late Eighties, and what sort of male bonding undercurrent Wong was bringing to it.

An obsessive 32-minute featurette goes into greater detail identifying the locations in Macao, Hong Kong and Bangkok where the film was shot ("One other thing which very much has remained the same—come follow me, come, come, come. Look at this. In the film, you can also see a brilliant manhole cover. It's in the film, you have to look very carefully. It's kind of a dark shot. There's another manhole cover here, as well, and these two manhole covers prove that this really is the street we are looking for. Amazing."). Also featured are a trailer, 3 minutes of alternate English language credits and a 45-minute interview with Cheung talking about his career, the film, and the people he has worked with, and then speaking at length about the Hong Kong film industry as a whole.

Superhero spoof

An admirable attempt to make an interesting superhero comedy drama on a limited budget, the 2020 Saban Films production conceived and directed by Jon McDonald, *The Hyperions*, has been released on Blu-ray by Well Go USA Entertainment (UPC#810348039477, \$30). The film's timeline jumps around a bit, but ignoring the distractions, most of the 90-minute film is set in the Seventies in a superhero museum where two former members of a superhero team, played by Penelope Mitchell and Alphonso McAuley, who left the group

while still in early adolescence, are holding the museum personnel hostage and demanding access to their former power badges, which give each wearer a specific exceptional ability. Cary Elwes is the professor who invented the badges and runs the team, but the film centers on Mitchell's character, who has specific reasons for her desperation. Elaine Tan is an older member of the group, who works for Elwes, has the ability to teleport from place to place and tries to negotiate with Mitchell's character. The film is more about the people than the powers, however, as it is the relationship between the Elwes and Mitchell characters that ultimately defines the film's emotional core.

While the drama is serious, McDonald also spoofs the genre in a number of different ways (the hostages play a board game from the exhibit, based upon the superhero team, to wile away their time, and invite McAuley's character to play with them), and uses inexpensive animation (for which McDonald is also credited) in a key scene, not just animating a segment of it entirely, but mixing the animation with reality, so that Elwes is, for example, holding an animated object in one shot and is entirely animated himself in another. Hence, the film is playful, to the point where viewers who are not prepared for the joke may become antsy with its limitations and concerns. Those who have an open mind, however, will feel engaged with the characters, amused by the offhand gags, superhero satire and exaggerated (or maybe not so exaggerated) Seventies décor, and suitably delighted when, very briefly and mostly off screen, the heroes employ their powers to save the day.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The color transfer looks fine, with accurate fleshtones. The 5.1-channel DTS sound has a serviceable dimensionality, and there are optional English subtitles, along with a trailer.

Revenge of the old geezers

Tell us you've got a movie with Patsy Kensit, Michael Paré and Danny Trejo, or just a movie with any one of them, and we're in, no further questions asked. But the great thing about the 2022 Saban Films production released on Blu-ray by Shoreline Entertainment, **Renegades** (UPC#840418336878, \$21), is that not only do all three performers appear, but Lee Majors was coaxed into it, as well. Set in London, Nick Moran stars as a former vet, kind of down on his luck, whose father served with Majors's character. Majors's character helps him get back on his feet, but then runs into some trouble himself with London mobsters, and Moran's character talks the veteran buddies of Majors's character into striking back at the mob. Paré only has a couple of scenes, and Trejo only a few more, but Kensit and Majors have a decent amount of screen time, and it is wonderful seeing both of them practicing their craft. Ian Ogilvy is also featured. Somewhat less than smoothly directed by Daniel Zirilli, the 93-minute film is awkwardly staged at times, and even the action scenes are not particularly slick, but the performances are uniformly fun, there are some marvelous character moments in the climax, and the whole concept of the feature—old geezers outsmarting young whippersnappers—well outweighs its technical shortcomings. That even extends to the Blu-ray, which does not start up where it left off if playback is terminated. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1, and the drone shots all look terrific, but when the camera is closer to the ground, the cinematography is a little uneven, although one supposes that the transfer is as accurate as it is going to get. The DTS sound seems centered, as well, and the gunshots are bland. There are optional English subtitles.

Bollywood Blu-rays

Another group of Bollywood features have been issued on Blu-ray by Shemaroo and Leomark Studios. The monophonic programs are in Hindi, have no menus, no chapter encoding and come with permanent English subtitling (with occasional typos) that also take note of occasional sound effects. The subtitling also makes creative use of the English language at times ("You have no option left other than being turning into an approver, now.").

An excellent courtroom thriller, **Aakrosh** (UPC#840418343166, \$24), stars Naseeruddin Shah as a public defender appointed to his first case, in which an indigenous native is charged with murdering his wife and dropping her into a well. He will say absolutely nothing and the closest members of his family will not speak to the lawyer, either, but as Shah's character starts digging, ambiguities arise and it becomes very clear that his mentor—the prosecutor facing him on the case—assigned it to him because of his inexperience. Running 143 minutes, the narrative advances gradually, but creates an involving atmosphere of paranoia and suspense, and while the conclusion may be somewhat more pessimistic than what Hollywood might offer, it is still a rewarding journey through the law and its corruption.

Only a few songs are included, but they are intelligently incorporated—there is a 'nightclub' sequence, music playing in the background on the radio as the lawyer does his research, and a number playing over the opening credits—and all are quite lovely. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1 and the image quality is somewhat of a strain. Hues are bland, fleshtones are dull and the picture is a little smeary at times, especially in darker sequences.

Running 189 minutes, the 1983 **Mahaan** (UPC#840418343272, \$24) appears to have two entirely separate stories that have nothing to do with one another. One is a melodrama, where a young man is accused of murder and then separated from his pregnant wife in a train accident as they try to escape. Thinking she is dead (although she isn't), he goes to Nepal and comes into a great fortune. Many years later, he attempts to purchase a diamond necklace that his wife had once admired, but gangsters (and the real murderer) also want the

necklace and attempt to steal it. The wife's son is a police detective, who is chasing after the misplaced necklace. In the other story, a romantic comedy, a man frantically aspiring to be an actor is hired by a woman who wants to persuade her wealthy father that she is serious about getting married even though she really isn't, so he doesn't cut off her allowance. Despite themselves, however, the two eventually fall for one another, at least that is the implication since you never really see the emotional transitions. But the thing is, the star, Amitabh Bachchan, is playing all three parts—the fugitive, the detective and the actor—and indeed, in the verging on incoherent and directionless narrative, everything comes together in the gloriously disjointed final act. It just needed nearly 3 hours to put all of the pieces in place.

Hence, the film, directed by S. Ramanathan, which never entirely loses its tone of seriously inept filmmaking, requires a great deal of patience and tolerance, but for open minded viewers, its rewards justify the healthy slice the film takes from one's cumulative lifespan. Those interested in the art of editing, for example, will be fascinated by a very elaborate car chase sequence where none of the shots match, shots are constantly repeated, and yet what is important—the momentum and energy of the scene—is sustained. It is a fascinating lesson. Car chases aside (and like most Indian films from that era), the fight scenes are beyond ridiculous, as the stuntmen don't even try to make contact with one another and the editing is of no help whatsoever at hiding the playacting (the climactic fight is even turned into a song number, in part to disguise its shortcomings). Yet despite the film's length, story points pop up out of nowhere, and disappear just as fast. In one sequence, a bad guy is sneaking around a mansion and spots the object he is after, but when he comes closer to retrieve it, a cobra is guarding it. He manages to grab it anyway, but when he runs out into the yard, there are cobras everywhere, and ultimately, he does not escape. The next day, his body is still there in the yard, but the snakes are nowhere to be seen, and it is only until much later in the film that you realize divine intervention was likely a factor in their appearance. A lot of the acting is silly, particularly in the romantic comedy segments, but most of the songs are appealing (outside of the fight scene, the choreography is of limited invention) and in what is hands down the film's best passage, the long separated husband and wife recognize one another in a phone call that turns into song and is presented entirely as close-ups of the two actors cut back and forth as tears stream from their cheeks. It is the one part of the film that genuinely pauses to soak up its emotional impact, and does so to the fullest.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1, with the subtitles usually appearing below the image. Despite some minor shifts in tone around the reel change points, the picture is in excellent condition, with bright, crisp hues and accurate fleshtones. The film is in Hindi. While there is a distinctive reverberation during much of the dialog, that appears to have been purposeful as part of the movie's original monophonic sound design.

The fights and stunts are more believable in the 2004 cops and gangsters film, **Aan: Men at Work** (UPC#840418343173, \$24). They may pale in comparison to Chinese stunt sequences, but the director, Madhur Bhandarkar, has John Woo on the brain—there is even a slow motion shot of doves. But of course there is. A cop played by Akshay Kumar is given a promotion and transferred at the same time, because his bosses are uncomfortable with how well he is busting up the mobsters who give them kickbacks. Although he is made the head of the department in another city, the cops underneath him are also irritated by his ethical standards. His virtue and drive gradually win them over, however, particularly an older cop played by Shatrughan Sinha, and they systematically work their way up the mob hierarchy, even when it branches into the justice system itself. Running 163 minutes, the story, though incoherent at times, is serviceable, and its underlying message about law enforcement pride is uplifting. The gore is wonderful, and even though some of the slow motion squib shots make no sense whatsoever—they've been staged to look great in slo-mo, not to be logical—every exchange is invigorating. They've come a long way from **Mahaan**, or at least they learned how to connect punches and make it look like they're breaking bones.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The musical numbers feel like they have dropped straight out of MTV, with nearly naked, gyrating bodies in leather and spikes ostensibly dancing at a disco. There is a music sequence in the center of the film that is truly magnificent and makes getting the entire disc worthwhile. It is another nightclub number, but then halfway through the cops come in and there is a bloody shootout mixed in with the dancing, along with **Lady from Shanghai** mirrors, sideways camera angles and all sorts of fun stuff. Makes you wish the disc had chapter encoding, to be sure. The colors look bright and reasonably sharp—the focus goes in and out sometimes, but that seems to be a thing with the cinematography. There is a stray speckle now and then, but it is easy enough to miss them entirely. Overall, the presentation looks slick. Although the Dolby logo appears in the end credits, the sound is centered.

Fellows extends his franchises

The first **Downton Abbey** movie (Apr 20) was a thrill and capped the loose ends that were left when the TV series folded. The second film, **Downton Abbey A New Era** (May 25), was flat out terrible, like trying to squeeze the remaining bits of moisture from a dry sponge. The third film, **Downton Abbey The Grand Finale**, a Universal Focus Features DVD release (UPC#19132928-3134, \$23), falls somewhere between the two. There is no plot device as inspired as the visit from the King in the first film, but the narrative does not split apart to

create 'A' and 'B' stories like the second movie did. Instead, the film, directed by Simon Curtis, is about Hugh Bonneville's character gradually realizing that it is time to retire and turn the management of his 'Downton' estate over to his daughter, played by Michelle Dockery, who has threatened the entire family's social standing by divorcing her husband. From that thread, there are plenty of strands involving the other characters, both upstairs and downstairs, and several undergo their own turning points, as well. The major new cast member, Paul Giamatti, is bland in the role as the American brother of Elizabeth McGovern's character (the wife of Bonneville's character), who has lost a fortune and is on the verge of infecting others with his losses, but there are too many characters for any one performer to take up much of the film's 123-minute running time. The scenarist and creator of the series, Julian Fellowes, lifts a story device he used for his script in Robert Altman's **Gosford Park** when the house staff stops their work to listen to a celebrity performing in the library after dinner, but otherwise, he just sort of puts the characters through their paces, which will be enjoyable to fans of the series and utterly baffling to anyone else. The 2025 film is set in 1930, but we don't for a minute believe that it is the last installment, as the approaching decade has more than its fair share of tempting events to affect the next generation of characters. Jim Carter, Penelope Wilson and Laura Carmichael costar, and most of the other cast members from the show and the previous films return.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. There is an audio track that describes the action ("Looking irritated, Harold walks to the house with Sambrook. Mary sits next to Cora on the bench."), alternate French and Spanish audio tracks, optional English, French and Spanish subtitles and 34 minutes of good behind-the-scenes promotional featurettes. Curtis and McGovern supply a commentary, mostly reminiscing about specific moments in the shoot as they appear on the screen, offering general praise for all of the participants, and talking about the series as a whole. "I think it is fascinating that some of our best plots have resulted in an actor just simply not wanting to come back—the death of Dan, the death of Sybil, Mary's divorce."

The first season of Fellowes's Americanized follow-up to **Downton Abbey**, **The Gilded Age** (Sep 22), was an awkward production that was often casting about, trying to find its voice and style, although it did manage to achieve a sufficient emotional impact to earn our good graces despite its shortcomings. Others apparently thought so, as well. The **Second Season** (Feb 25) was better honed. It was still putting things together and plagued now and then with anachronisms, particularly in the dialog, but it was an improvement over **First Season** and began to genuinely attract the attention it deserved. Nevertheless, although **Third Season** was a breakout hit, nothing quite prepared us for how good the show had become when we put on the three-platter HBO Video DVD release, **The Gilded Age The Complete Third Season** (UPC#883929841905, \$25). The season doesn't just hit a home run, every episode hits a home run and indeed, almost every scene hits a home run. A glorious blend of romance, finance and period splendor, every moment in the season is spellbinding.

It is also greatly improved. Unlike the previous two seasons, there was not an uttered phrase or incident that felt out of place or time. Essentially, while delivering enough entertainment to keep the viewer watching the stories, the previous two seasons set up the characters so that **Third Season** could explore the consequences of each previous choice and experience. Like Fellowes's third **Downton Abbey** film, the narrative explores the intense social stigma of divorce, particularly for women, and is not afraid to suggest that at times, couples in an arranged marriage can be very happy, while couples who married for love can be miserable. It is best to let the individual plot points be discovered as they arise, however. As with **Downton Abbey**, the barriers between the families and the staff are not impenetrable, leading to many delightful interactions. Christine Baranski and Cynthia Nixon provide humor as widows living together who have seen their fortunes upended, while across the street, Morgan Spector and Carrie Coon provide the dramatic core as an enormously wealthy couple attempting to establish themselves in New York society. Louisa Jacobson plays a character living with the Baranski and Nixon characters, who becomes involved with the son of the Spector and Coon characters, tying the two storylines together. Denée Benton, Audra McDonald and John Douglas Thompson portray a well-to-do African-American family, whose lives also intersect with the others, and there is a welcome exploration of black society as well, revealing the subtle prejudices they have among themselves between lighter skinned and darker skinned individuals. The season builds to a lovely crescendo, and then adds on a couple of quick but potent cliffhangers to leave one in anxiety until the next season is completed.

Eight episodes are spread across three platters, running a total of 466 minutes, and each platter has a 'Play All' option. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The color transfer looks super and opulence is one of the show's primary attractions. The 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound has a pleasing dimensionality, and there are optional English subtitles, along with 16 minutes of interesting promotional featurettes.

All in the family

An excellent six-part 2025 series produced by UKTV and Britbox International, **Outrageous**, has been released on a two-platter DVD by BBC (UPC#883929841769, \$30). Based upon a true story, the program concerns an

aristocratic British family in the Thirties (pretty much a winning formula regardless of the content), the Mitfords, with seven siblings including six sisters, two of whom became notorious in Britain for supporting Nazi causes, although another supported communism and another, the film's central character, was an author who tended to satirize all of the extremes. Bessie Carter stars as the author character, with Joanna Vanderham, Shannon Watson, Isobel Jesper Jones, Orla Hill and Zoe Brough. James Purefoy, Anna Chancellor and Joshua Sasse are also featured. One of the sisters even becomes good friends with Adolf Hitler (whose character is seen but kept on the periphery), while another marries the head of the British Nazi movement, Oswald Mosley (who becomes a major figure in the story). Meanwhile, the family is going broke and as each sister becomes an adult, she increasingly has to fend for herself. The show makes sure viewers are able to keep track of who is who by constantly identifying the characters with titles until you begin to recognize them, and it ticks off the passage of time so you always know where and when you are. Meanwhile, the program is able to dive into the workings of the British Nazi party while maintaining a deft neutrality, and the arguments the characters have about fascism and the appeal of cult leaders not only sustain a great deal of relevance for contemporary viewers, but will probably continue to do so well into the future. It is an entertaining and fascinating tale, with enjoyable performances and a very diverse set of characters. The only drawback to the program is that it ends in early 1937 with several cliffhangers aching to be followed upon.

Each of the two platters has a 'Play All' option and the program runs 271 minutes in total. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2:1 and the color transfer looks fine, with lots of great costumes and period décor. The 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound has a pleasing dimensionality, and there are optional English subtitles.

Historical India miniseries

Set before India was under complete British control, near the end of the Eighteenth Century, the luscious six-part 2019 miniseries, **Beecham House**, released as a two platter **Masterpiece** DVD set by PBS (UPC#841887043359, \$40), tells a resolute story, but then concludes with a major cliffhanger, and there is no indication that a follow up series will come to pass. It is a shame, because the show is an enjoyable mix of adventure, excitement, romance and exotic wealth. Tom Bateman is a former British East India Company officer who quit the service when he saw how unscrupulous and inhumane the Company was being. In the first episode, he moves into a grand palace in Delhi and works to obtain a trading license from the local ruler, despite the efforts of a French commander to prevent British influences in the area. He also arrives with a baby, but no apparent wife, much to the consternation of his mother, who shows up a little while later. Why he can afford a palace, what the circumstances are regarding the baby and, for that matter, what his own marital status is become mysteries that are gradually revealed as the narrative advances, but as it unfolds, the combination of the film's plotting and its fabulous locations is more than enough to keep a viewer transported.

The program runs 317 minutes and there is no 'Play All' option. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1 and the image transfer is smooth and slick, fully supportive of the luscious cinematography. The stereo sound has a basic dimensionality and clear tones. There are optional English subtitles, an excellent 10-minute interview with series creator and director Gurinder Chadha and 27 minutes of additional promotional pieces that convey a good sense of how the show was staged, including the locations and the set designs.

Stallone on TV

Achieving an ideal blend of humor and mob drama, Sylvester Stallone plays a septuagenarian mobster released from prison after a quarter century who is rewarded by his New York boss for his loyalty by being sent to Tulsa, Oklahoma and told that the territory is his to do with what he will in the 2022 Paramount series, **Tulsa King Season One**, a three-platter Paramount DVD (UPC#191329246481, \$32). Stallone is not given a writing credit, but his stamp is on practically everything and his quips are constantly amusing. Things eventually get serious, but the comedy is never far away as he arrives in town, immediately hires his cab driver to be his personal chauffeur, and begins raking in cash by demanding a piece of a marijuana dispensary. The subsequent plot turns are too much fun to spoil, but there are also moments of suitable drama and emotional exchange, and eventually there is a fair amount of violence, as well. It may not be the most sophisticated crime series to grace the small screen, but the show is much too enjoyable to disparage.

Nine episodes are spread over the three platters, running a total of 348 minutes, and each platter has a 'Play All' option. Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2:1, the image is sharp and glossy. The 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound has a satisfying dimensionality, and there are quite a few high level pop and country-western tunes mixed into the score. Although the one that we were waiting for, *Twenty-four Hours to Tulsa*, isn't among them, a character does squeeze a reference to it into his dialog at one point, describing how long it took to drive there from New York. There are optional English subtitles and 112 minutes of good promotional featurettes.

A few adjustments are made in **Tulsa King Season Two**, another three-platter Paramount release (UPC#191329272855, \$26), so that the narrative has more potential to grow and expand, but despite the inherent silliness of the concept, neither Stallone nor the series come close to wearing out their welcome. As Stallone's character tries to settle into his businesses, various interests,

including a mob in Kansas City, try to persuade him to give them a share. Hence, things get serious, but not so much so that the humor disappears. Originally broadcast in 2024, we apparently had to wait for the always youthful Stallone to reach real maturity before he could do something like this, but we had to wait for Italian mobster TV programs to thoroughly establish their tropes as well, so that the series can gently play with the concept without seeming absurd or ridiculous. It would be easy enough to pick the show apart, but like **Season One**, it is too amusing and likable to dismiss.

Ten episodes are spread across the three platters, running a total of 404 minutes. The picture and sound presentations are identical to **Season One**, and there are an additional 51 minutes of not quite as elaborate promotional featurettes.

The agony and the ecstasy

A three-part BBC and PBS documentary with dramatic enactments depicting the final decades of the Renaissance and the beginning of the Reformation through the eyes of Michelangelo as it also profiles the lives and works of three artists, Michelangelo, Leonardo Da Vinci and Raphael, **Renaissance The Blood and the Beauty**, has been released on a single-platter DVD by BBC (UPC#883929838851, \$20). Charles Dance plays the older Michelangelo who tells some of the story—often utilizing translations of Michelangelo’s writings and other contemporary documents—while another actor plays his younger self. These depictions are intercut with statements of explanation and insight by art experts, and the major works that each artist created are deconstructed as the creations arise in the narrative. The documentary is ideal for viewers who have enough knowledge of the time and the artists to understand some of the references and context, but not so much that the summaries supplied by the program will seem superficial or shallow. On the whole, the program is certainly educational, and contains a workable amount of drama in the rollercoaster lives that each of the three rival artists led through times of great upheaval, especially since, with regularity and in service of the story it is telling, some of mankind’s most profound and beautiful works of paint and stone are gazed upon and celebrated in detail.

The combined episodes run 185 minutes (not the 180 listed on the jacket), and there is a ‘Play All’ option. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback (not the 2.35:1 listed on the jacket). Lines are often a little soft and colors are a bit fuzzy here and there, but the image is generally presentable. The Dolby Digital sound has just two channels, not the 5.1 listed on the jacket, but the background music sustains a pleasant dimensionality. There are optional English subtitles.

Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo

An accomplishment greater than changing a pumpkin into a coach, Cleopatra Entertainment has taken a typically hazy and monotone Nineties heavy metal concert program, **Cinderella in Concert**, and turned it into an impressive Blu-ray (UPC#889466715587, \$25). Perhaps augmented by dry ice, the smoke-filled Detroit performance hall creates a challenging environment for cameras and even more so for home video playback, but despite the danger of smears, grain or displacement, the BD never, ever succumbs. The band is sort of in constant emergence from the haze, perfectly highlighted from their surroundings and colored with precise accuracy regardless of how intensely they are draped by stage-lit hues. The consistent precision of the squared full screen image does not just validate the concert recording, it adds to the show’s inherent energy and excitement.

The actual date of the concert is not listed, but the program has a 2004 copyright. The band plays what we termed on an LD collection of their music videos we reviewed in Aug 90 as ‘light heavy metal,’ the sort of music that you can have on when your parents are around and they won’t complain all that much while still being cognizant of a serious and virtually impassible generation gap. Sporting long hair and unkempt gentleman’s attire (diminishing on all of the band members to various levels of bare chests by the end of the 83-minute show), with tight leather pants that may explain why their vocals are so high pitched, they are also slightly less threatening than harder core heavy metal bands—if you come across them in a dark alley, you probably wouldn’t tremble—but appear to take their responsibilities to their audience with great enthusiasm. The lead singer, Tom Keifer, may be able to coax a little more range out of his vocals in a studio environment, but for live concerts, he basically shouts and screams a single note, and figures that since the pulsating guitars (there is also a loud saxophone) are mostly drowning him out, no one will notice the difference. From the enthusiasm recorded of the audience, it appears no one does.

The disc’s 5.1-channel Dolby Digital track nudges a little more dimensionality out of the entire band while orienting the crowd’s screaming a bit more effectively than the default two-channel stereo track, but it is all pretty much an unvarying mass of sound anyway. The drum solo is the high point of the show, because there is a greater clarification of an individual component to the music. There is no captioning. A nice 4-minute montage of band photos is also featured.