

Made for video

As in the United States, the home video industry in Japan was so lucrative in the Nineties that film companies began producing movies designed specifically for video release, and nine such features have been gathered on the terrific Arrow Video five-platter Blu-ray set, **V-Cinema Essentials Bullets & Betrayal** (UPC#760137172901, \$100). The films are all presented in a squared full screen format. While the images vary in the amount of grain they contain, hues are always fresh and fleshtones are accurate. During darker scenes, the picture can get a little murky, and in most of the films, grain is pronounced even during strong daylight sequences, but what usually happens is that you become oblivious to it after a while, since some scenes are not grainy at all and what is going on in the films is usually too engaging to enable distractions. The stereo sound is relegated to the music on each film, and while most of scores have surges of Eighties dance-style music adding to the excitement, there is also a lot of jazz, and it sounds lovely with the intricate separations and steady dimensionality. The films are in Japanese with optional English subtitles, and are all accompanied by excellent 3 to 5-minute introductions (best watched afterwards, of course) that provide a cogent thumbnail profile of the director and the stars, and explain the exceptional appeal each film achieves, as well as highlighting the attractions of the V-Cinema format. "What I'd call V-Cinema fans are not people who reject movie theaters. They are old-school movie fans. They're people who used to go to movie theaters, but they no longer find there what they came for. If you compare it to the A-side and B-side of records, it's like movie theaters only offered the A-side but these people preferred the B-side."

And the first movie, *Crime Hunter*, is worth the price of the set. It runs just 58 minutes, but in all likelihood kept a squib company in the black for a whole year, if not a decade. The film is one bang-up bloody gunfight after another, and it is a total riot. Shot in Okinawa but pretending to be Los Angeles, the story is about a 'Little Tokyo' cop, played by Masanori Sera, who quits the force to take revenge on the gang that killed his partner. He meets a gun-toting nun who is trying to retrieve several million dollars (although, from the size of the bag, it looks like the filmmakers were thinking yen) that was stolen from her church charity, and the two quests coincide, so the two team up and blast their way through to the money and the truth. Drawing as much iconography from the Rambo movies as it does from cop films, the 1989 production is a symphony of slaughter, and yet it has just enough character development and plot to justify its frantic action and bloodletting. If you want to entertain your friends and you only have an hour, you can't ask more for your popcorn.

Along with a trailer and an excellent 13-minute summary of the beginning of the home video market in Japan and the rise of V-Cinema, there is a really nice 18-minute interview with director Shundo Okawa, who is very candid about the learning experiences he went through making *Crime Hunter*, which was his first film, but also claims, proudly, some of the innovations he created for the gun effects. He says he set the film in America so that he didn't have to come up with excuses about why all of the characters have firearms.

The companion film on the platter, the 1990 *Neo Chinpira: Zoom Goes the Bullet*, offers a very different set of pleasures. Running 86 minutes, there are only a couple of violent scenes, and while there is an appreciable amount of sex, it is entirely in support of the developing characters. Show Aikawa, who had a small but very noticeable part in *Crime Hunter*, became a star as the lead in *Neo Chinpira*, playing a sort of yakuza-in-training and chauffeur, who takes almost the entire movie to work up the courage to pull off the assassination he has been assigned. He spends much of his time with a girlfriend, played by Chikako Aoyama, who was standoffish until she got to fire his gun, and subsequently cannot get enough of either the gun or him. Sixties Japanese crime star Joe Shishido has a nice supporting part as the uncle of Aikawa's character. The film is sort of like there is a genuine yakuza movie going on somewhere else, and what you are seeing are the characters in their off time from it, like *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, but it is a very unique concoction. While not everyone will be satisfied with Aikawa's brooding, most will find the film's wit (the movie is ostensibly a comedy) and the sex to be a sufficient compensation. The film is accompanied by a trailer and an informative 15-minute interview with director Banmei Takahashi, reflecting on the film's creation and his memories of the various cast members.

Yûko Natori delivers a definitive performance as a female cab driver working the night shift, who is being terrorized by an anonymous stalker driving a black SUV in the entertaining thriller, *Stranger*. Running 89 minutes, the 1991 film takes its time to establish its characters, including the other cab company drivers and several passengers, so that you become invested in the heroine and her plight, and then it divvies out the thrills, even as you wonder if she is just imagining everything. Directed by Shunichi Nagasaki, it is exactly the sort of movie one hopes to come across in this kind of anthology. It may not be monumental, but it is a very effective execution of a basic suspense premise and is enormously satisfying for its competent blend of embellishments and excitements. The film is accompanied by a good 18-minute interview with Nagasaki ("It's not only about creating suspense. I wanted the main character to look at these different people, who appear from out of the scenery, but to never have any kind of relationship with them."), who admits he copied some shots from Steven Spielberg's *Duel*.

In the companion film, *Carlos*, a Brazilian-Japanese gangster, memorably played by Naoto Takenaka, steps into a yakuza war, manipulating

both sides in an attempt to rise to the top. The film was directed by a manga artist, Kazuhiro Kiuchi. Along with being visually engaging while maintaining an earthy perspective, the editing is exceptional. While one scene, where a boss smashes an underling with a crystal bowl, has clearly been snipped, it is also clear that the narrative only had to provide hints of what occurred to keep the story moving. At another point, the camera lingers on a close up of a man who is about to be shot in the head, and lingers, and lingers, and lingers. It is an amazing moment. Running 92 minutes, the 1990 film captures the spirit of a yakuza movie with the essence of such a film's politics and violence, but infuses it with the fascinating impurities of outsiders trying to get into the game—there is also a deadly American hitman, played by George Wilson—and a nihilism that is as much about an outside motion picture format looking in as it is about the characters. Also featured is a good 20-minute interview with Kiuchi, who allows as to how Takenaka could never have landed such a meaty role in a theatrical feature, and an 18-minute summary of the film's plot and artistic components.

Since the film shows rather than tells, it takes a while to figure out that the 1991 *Burning Dog* is a heist movie, but it turns out to be a very satisfying one. Set in Okinawa, Seiji Matano (with an abundance of screen magnetism, he played kind of a villain in *Crime Hunter*, but is the hero here) has a bad experience in a previous heist and ends up on the island to shake things off, only to get pulled into a plan to rob a U.S. military payroll. The film, directed by Yôichi Sai, runs a full 103 minutes, so it has time to develop the characters and their idiosyncrasies, and the heist sequence is especially satisfying—as is, for once, when it comes to heist films, the ending. A few details here and there don't make a lot of sense or are left unexplained, but overall there is a decent amount of sex, lots of exhilarating violence, and plenty of star power to carry the characters along. Additional to a trailer, there is a 16-minute overview of the film and the careers of the director and stars.

We reviewed Arrow's **Female Prisoner Scorpion The Complete Collection**, a terrific Japanese cult series from the early Seventies, in Oct 16. The last entry of the series was certainly open ended, however, and it makes perfect sense to continue the indulgence with the 1991 *Female Prisoner Scorpion: Death Threat*, which fully acknowledges the double decade gap between the other films and the follow up. Yûko Mizushima stars as a female assassin who is hired to kill the former 'Scorpion' in prison and, surprising no one, ends up being a prisoner there herself. Running 91 minutes, all of the 'women's prison film' tropes are covered with flair and the film, directed by Toshiharu Ikeda, is both energetic and enjoyable. A trailer is included, as well as a good 12-minute piece summarizing the entire **Female Prisoner Scorpion** series and its themes.

As he first steps out of the shadows and into the light, Hideki Saijo looks exactly like Charles Bronson, although once he is fully lit it is clear he does not have a mustache. He does, however, have the same killer instinct and it serves him well in the 1991 *The Hitman: Blood Smells Like Roses* (a Chuck Norris film also called *The Hitman* came out the same year). The film opens with a depiction of three men raping a woman one of them has picked up in a night club, although after viewers are given the chance to savor the idea of it, Saijo's character shows up and spoils their party. After that, there is a flashback to show how his character, an innocent trucker, ended up becoming a deadly vigilante, and the circumstances are a little different, but the dialog even manages to slip in the phrase, 'death wish,' while Saijo's clothing and hair are a match for Bronson's. In some profile shots, for a quick second, he looks exactly like Bronson.

The director, Teruo Ishii, who also made *Abashiri Prison* (Oct 24), has a strong and pleasing visual sense. He places the camera in the bottom of a stairwell to catch Saijo shooting from the top of the stairs, and elsewhere he follows a woman with a bright red jacket across a crowded noonday intersection—nobody else is wearing anything near a bright. The leader of one yakuza gang has a stuffed tiger's head on his desk and the camera is positioned so that the face of the tiger is in the lower right corner of the screen, while the boss is above and in the center, and his henchmen surround him, arguing about how to strike back at what they think is a mob war.

In the other introductions, it is explained that *Carlos* and, secondarily, *Stranger*, received the greatest critical praise among all of the V-Cinema films, but to our mind, *The Hitman: Blood Smells Like Roses* is the best, most entertaining movie in a collection filled with entertainments. While working his way through the yakuza hierarchies, Saijo's character gets help from an attractive thief played by Natsumi Nanase, giving the film a viable romantic component, and there is also a dogged detective who begins to understand that he is not investigating a mob war per se. Running 85 minutes, the story is solidly conceived, while the film's cinematography, action, sex and star power are all exceptional. An 8-minute overview of Ishii's remarkably diverse career is included, along with a trailer.

When the camera opens and the credits appear, the image of a blossoming wild flower fills the screen and you worry, 'Oh dear, is this going to be some kind of la, la, la film?' But once the credits near completion (spoiler alert), a large black tire stops right on the flowers, grinding them into the ground, and you know you are in good company. The 1991 *Danger Point: The Road to Hell*, directed by Yasuharu Hasebe (he also made **Black Tight Killers**—Feb 24), has a terrific, methodical a-to-b-to-c-to-d plot that carries you for a full 100 minutes, from those first images to the very end. It is marvelous storytelling that keeps you involved with the characters and interested in what they will find next. Shishido stars with Aikawa, playing a pair of hit men who are about to kill their

mark when the mark offers them an enormous amount of money. Yeah, they kill him anyway, but then they start tracking down the money. The sex and the action are there, and are fully satisfying, but it is the storytelling that is the film's true strength, carrying you along from character to character as the two men follow the history of the money to its final destination. The ending is inevitable but follows the same compelling logic that guides every scene, and the performances are wonderful. Also featured is a 15-minute summary of Shishido and Hasebe's careers.

The fifth platter holds just one film, the wacky 1994 *XX: Beautiful Hunter*, which is best left to be discovered, such as it is. Makiko Kuno plays an assassin trained from childhood, by an oddball Christian cult led by a blind 'Father,' to kill people. And then she meets a nice guy... At one point the villains tie her up so she is hanging by her wrists. They had dressed her in black latex and then cut off the latex to expose her legs and one breast. Then they spray her with a hose and whip her. That seems to be the point of the film, actually. Johnny Okura costars. Running 90 minutes, the image looks decent—while hazy at times, the picture has the least amount of grain in the set—and there certainly is plenty of sex and violence. Directed by softcore porn veteran Masaru Konuma, if you are looking for a strong narrative to go with that, you had best look elsewhere.

Along with a trailer, there is a 19-minute overview of the careers of the cast and crew (there is a particular appreciation of the cinematography) combined with a history of the V-Cinema films that summarizes how the talent all came together to create the feature; and an interesting 18-minute interview with screenwriter Hiroshi Takahashi, who talks about how the story, such as it is, was developed. "This film made me realize how difficult it is to have a woman as a protagonist. Not that it's difficult to write female characters, the problem is the man beside her. With a male hero, the woman next to him is appealing even if she doesn't do anything. As a writer, you don't have to worry about it. But when the main character is a woman, the male supporting character has to work hard, even at the screenplay stage, for their charm to come out. Otherwise, the woman stands out and the man gets lost."

Kiarostami's unique poetry

Abbas Kiarostami loves watching people walk or drive up and down hillsides, and nobody really captures the cinematic possibilities of these moments better. You inevitably come to see his hillsides as a pathway to heaven, and the people, fumbling about, getting closer and farther away as they come and they go.

Another exceptional film from the amazing movie year of 1999, Kiarostami's *The Wind Will Carry Us* (*Bad Ma Ra Khahad Bord*) is set in a remote rural Iranian village that is carved into a hillside so that the fields in the valley below can be used for cultivation. There are other hills around the village as well. The highest one holds the cemetery, which is where the protagonist, played by Behzad Dorani, who has a James Woods thing going, must hop into his car and drive to whenever he gets a phone call, because it is the only location clear enough for him to get service on his phone. Dorani's character claims to be an engineer, but as the 118-minute film unfolds, you gradually piece together that he actually has another purpose for visiting the town, and becomes increasingly frustrated—and downright evil—when he is unable to do what he came to do. He has a crew with him, who remain unseen—while not emphatically so, Kiarostami avoids reverse angle shots a lot of the time, and particularly when he doesn't want you to see stuff. We hear the crew talking to Dorani's character now and then, but so far as the movie's visuals are concerned, he is alone.

Released on Blu-ray by MK2, Janus Films and The Criterion Collection (UPC#715515313216, \$40), the film is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1, and it is the breathtaking views of the hillside, and the fascinating, vertically labyrinthine intricacy of the town, that hold the viewer spellbound as the actions and frustrations of Dorani's character play out. The monophonic sound is clean and strong, and while Kiarostami often uses voiceover conversations with characters placed at a distance from the camera, the detailed background and environmental noises shift flawlessly to the passages where you can see the characters talking. The film is in Persian and Kurdish, with optional English subtitles. While the subtitles are lightly outlined in black, they can be difficult to read in scenes set in the village, where all the walls are white. The color transfer is sharp and precise, and the brown, treeless hills and golden grass are captivating. The locations would be exotic even for residents of Tehran, and for viewers from other parts of the globe, the film, as it is presented on the Blu-ray, essentially transports the viewer to another world. In the same manner, the BD magnifies the power of Kiarostami's unique cinematic poetry, placing the viewer in a deceptively pedestrian set of actions that barely qualify as a drama, yet brought to the mystery of the sublime by the fusion of its arid beauty and universal humanity.

The supplements do not start up where they left off if playback is terminated, even the 90-minute production documentary, *A Week with Kiarostami*, shot by a Japanese camera crew on location. The documentary depicts four days of shooting in the town (and getting an apple to role properly off a balcony) and then three in a nearby wooded area where they eventually cut apart a dead tree and place it across a stream, because the existing dead trees across the stream did not meet their needs. Along with always trying to get the actors to use less Persian and more Kurdish, Kiarostami spends a particular amount of time coaxing a child actor from the village, who is a central character in the film, to give the performance he is hoping for. Also featured is a trailer; an

excellent 53-minute interview with Kiarostami about the film (the villagers would never sit still because they had so much work to do before winter came, so he had a difficult time populating his movie with extras), his motivation behind various sequences (he put in a traveling shot in the woods only because he wanted to cheer up his camera crew—he didn't really like the shot, although from an outsider's perspective, it's a wonderful moment), how he loves using animals because they have no self-conscious reaction to the camera ("I would say the best actor here is the rooster. It's wondering, 'Where should it go? Where shouldn't it go?' It acts better than our actor."), and the many symbols he incorporated within the images; and an artsy 15-minute piece that is really more of a home video promo reel, combining clips from many different Kiarostami films with quotations from his poetry ("All night long I thought. As a result I slept all day.").

Kinji Fukasaku classics

Akira Kurosawa co-authored the script (there are a couple of conversations about dreams) for Kinji Fukasaku's richly textured 1964 Toei masterpiece, *Jakoman & Tetsu*, an 88 Films Blu-ray (UPC#760137178088, \$40). The film plays like it was made a decade or even a couple of decades earlier, which is when it is set, but that is part of its accomplishment, capturing its period so thoroughly that the environment is even conveyed through the Neorealistic manner of the film itself. Taking place in the far north of Japan, it is about a herring fisherman played by Isao Yamagata who has gathered migrant workers for a big seasonal haul that occurs every year when the herring arrive in his bay to spawn. His son, played by a young Ken Takakura, shows up with the migrants, as does a man who has a serious grudge against Yamagata's character, played by Tetsurō Tamba (these latter two actors, in reverse order, provide the character names that serve as the movie's title). Running 100 minutes, the film follows several dramas during the wintry wait for the spawning to occur, and like the spawning, the film uses the event to capture these co-mingled dramas in its net, including a labor conflict that occurs when the stinginess of Yamagata's character gets the best of him. The actual fishing scenes are both exciting and edifying, while the different character stories and experiences bring an abundance of flavor and emotional exploration to the narrative.

The film does not start up where it left off if playback is terminated. The black-and-white picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. Despite the widescreen, however, the film feels aged, with a number of errant speckles and a general softness in the contrasts. The film is fully watchable, it just feels older than it is. The monophonic sound is fairly strong and there is a compelling Masaru Satō musical score. The movie is in Japanese with optional English subtitles, and comes with a minute-long montage of memorabilia and a good 18-minute overview of the story and the film's production.

Also featured is a commentary discussion with two Japanese film experts, Tom Mes and Jasper Sharp, who talk a lot about the careers of Fukasaku and the cast members, and also go over an earlier version of the story that Kurosawa was also involved with (that version featured Toshiro Mifune in the Takakura role, and they compare the careers of the two stars), as well as talking a lot about movies set in Hokkaido. All of that said, they seem to miss the forest from the trees and fail to grasp what a truly unique Neorealist accomplishment the film is, or how effectively the performances and the direction lend themselves to the movie's entertainment.

Fukasaku wonderfully frantic yakuza film from 1977, *Horkuriku Proxy War*, has been released on Blu-ray by Radiance Films (UPC#76013717-2833, \$40). The film is set on Japan's west coast and although it takes place across several years, it is always winter. In fact, the protagonist, an upstart gangster played by Hiroki Matsukata, likes to bury his competitors in the snow up to their heads and then drive an open jeep around them. Sonny Chiba is also featured. The 97-minute film opens with one of such sequence and then never really slows down, as Matsukata's character eliminates the branches of the gangs from the east coast that are trying to take over the rackets in his home territory. The pulsing musical score, by Toshiaki Tsushima, sounds like it came straight from Ennio Morricone and sets the non-stop pace. Even though the film is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1, much of the movie feels like it was shot with handheld cameras, and even when the camera is locked down, it is placed really close to the characters or at awkward angles, to keep the viewer from settling in. There can be times when one loses track of which characters are working with which group, but it eventually becomes clear, or clear enough, what the pathways are, and in the meantime, a viewer can savor the violence and relentless mix of formal politeness and underhanded backstabbing that all of the characters engage in as they vie for a position of control. Basically, if you have run out of really good American gangster films to watch—and face it, there really aren't that many—then turn to Japan if you want to continue your fix, and *Horkuriku* is as good a place as any to begin.

The image is usually a bit grainy, but since even during the daytime it is always taking place in the middle of a heavy snowstorm, the picture is never going to be bright or entirely clear. Since it is setting a specific mood, the transfer looks terrific and not even the occasional stray speckle can upset the film's atmosphere or a basic satisfaction with its presentation. The monophonic sound is fine and we would cut off our little finger to find a copy of the musical score. The film is Japanese with optional English subtitles and comes with a trailer; a really good 16-minute interview with co-star Yoko Takahashi, who has vivid memories of the production; a nice 19-minute rumination upon the film's

creation by screenwriter Koji Takada; and a 15-minute analysis of the film that talks about the uncomfortable situation which was created because the film was based upon actual Yakuza figures. In fact, Fukasaku interviewed one such individual in a particular booth of a particular café, and then shot the film in the same café, where there is an attempt on the life of Matsukata's character in the same booth. A couple of months after the film was released, the man Fukasaku had interviewed was assassinated, while sitting in that same booth.

Being a small island filled with people, Japan has a reputation for overcrowding and that reputation percolates throughout Fukasaku's impressively managed 1975 Toei crime film, **Cops vs. Thugs**, an Arrow Video DVD & Blu-ray (UPC#760137992981, \$50). Almost every scene is set in a bar, an office, an automobile and so forth, and every scene is crammed with people, so that you aren't just trying to figure out who is who, you're trying to figure out who is talking. Even letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1, Fukasaku overpopulates nearly every shot, and once you get used to it, you realize his direction becomes not only a way of intensifying the conflicts created by police corruption and a mob war, but that it begins to feel like a unique cinematic approach, and is enormously satisfying simply as a storytelling style. On subsequent viewings, you find yourself paying more and more attention to the characters in the background and on the sides (and, at times, poking into the foreground), even as their presence pulls you into the central drama.

It does take a while to get a handle on who the primary gangsters are and who the major cops are—not only is there a mob war, but members of the police are beholden to one side or the other of that war—and it is only at about the halfway point of the 104-minute feature that a new cop, played by Tatsuo Umemiya, is brought in to clean up the town, which he wisely begins by cleaning up his own department. It is at that point that you stop just cruising with the violence and the sex and the money schemes the characters are involved in and really become excited watching loyalties and friendships fray, and onlookers start to take sides. Fukasaku's style is so compelling that when, at the very end of the film, one of the protagonists dies totally and completely alone, the character's uncrowded alienation feels overwhelming.

Bunta Sugawara and Matsukata star. Other than a stray speckle now and then, the picture transfer looks sharp, fleshtones are accurate and hues are strong. The monophonic sound is fine and the film is in Japanese with optional English subtitles. Also featured is a trailer, a 14-minute look at Fukasaku's career, 5 minutes of behind-the-scenes footage including an interview with Fukasaku talking about the characters, and a good 9-minute overview of the film's creation and themes. We were unable to assess the DVD included in the set.

A gangster released from prison after a decade of incarceration, played by Kōji Tsuruta, discovers that most of Japan has been taken over by a large syndicate, so he gathers the handful of former associates who have remained loyal to him and transplants himself to Okinawa, which is still open territory, as it were, in Fukasaku's 1971 Toei production, **Sympathy for the Underdog**, a Radiance Blu-ray (UPC#760137155843, \$40). Tsuruta's character gradually wrestles control of the strip clubs and the port from the diverse factions controlling different areas of the town, only to see the syndicate take interest after he has managed to consolidate things. The film is shot in a gritty, headline-grabbing manner, but still manages to slip in the personalities of the gangsters between the flurries of violent confrontations. Running 93 minutes, the film implies that the protagonists have accomplished everything entirely by themselves, without building an hierarchy beneath the half-dozen characters who begin the film, but otherwise the movie, inspired by real events, is an enjoyable crime feature. The Okinawa locations, often captured on the sly, also add to the film's fascinations. In both triumph and failure, Tsuruta is totally cool at all times (he spends most of the film wearing dark glasses), and you completely understand why his men would remain so loyal to him. As one of the island's crime bosses, Tomisaburō Wakayama from the **Lone Wolf and Cub** films delivers an appealingly excessive performance, and the film's balance between bursts of chaotic violence and passages of strategic posturing is enough to keep a viewer captivated.

Noboru Ando and Kenji Imai are also featured. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The color transfer is fresh, although the film's grungy atmosphere prevents the image from having a standout presence. In the few shots where portions of the screen are clearly lit, the details and accuracy of the hues are readily apparent and admirable. The monophonic sound is passable, and there is a wonderful jazz score by Takeo Yamashita, supplemented quite nicely by Okinawa folk music—one of the themes of the film is that the Japanese characters are just as intrusive upon the local culture as the Americans. The film is in Japanese with optional English subtitles. Along with a trailer, there is a thoughtful 27-minute appreciation of the film and Fukasaku's career, and a terrific 26-minute look at the changing fortunes that have undergone Okinawa in Japanese films, with lots of great clips and stills.

An expert in Japanese gangster movies, Nathan Stuart (who says he has never seen **The Wild Bunch** because it is not a yakuza film, although others compare Fukasaku to Sam Peckinpah and **Sympathy for the Underdog** to **Wild Bunch** specifically; Fukasaku's work may even be a key to understanding **Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia**), provides an informative commentary track, talking about the yakuza genre and how the film and the cast members fit into the

growth and changes the movies were undergoing at the time. His talk contains many insightful details about the film at hand, while also examining the impact the genre was having. "To understand these films is that they go far beyond just being based upon a true story. We've got Noboru Ando, a real life yakuza, who went to prison, got out, became an actor. We've got yakuza bosses being able to request who plays them in biographies. We've got police raiding the Toei offices because they think they're too sympathetic to the yakuza. We've got yakuza hanging around on set, being nuisances. Private screening set ups, so yakuza bosses and their family members can view the film before it is released to the general public. And it all adds up to this huge, fascinatingly rich and complex way of going about business and influencing this important genre of film that would go on to become not just influential but also incredibly popular."

4K Concubine

A history of 20th Century China as seen through the eyes of two actors in the Peking Opera, Kaige Chen's 1993 **Farewell My Concubine** is as visually captivating as it is emotionally gripping, and thus makes an ideal two-platter Film Movement Classics Criterion Collection 4K Blu-ray (UPC#715515299817, \$50). First seen as children undergoing the horrific training regimen that must be endured if they are to become artists, the partners are played as adults by Leslie Cheung and Fengyi Zhang, with Li Gong playing a prostitute who upsets their offstage equilibrium, at least in the eyes of Cheung's character, when she marries Zhang's character. Meanwhile, China is first invaded by Japan, then beset by Civil War, and finally torn inside out by the Cultural Revolution. Running 152 minutes, the film is visually transfixing (the initial scenes from the Twenties are in black and white with amazing incisions of dulled reds within the images), whether it is the incredibly colored details of Cheung's stage face and costumes, or the dank urban landscapes of war and revolt, and in 4K, every frame is transcendent. The film's presentation on the standard Blu-ray would probably be fine and is certainly more stable than the Miramax DVD we reviewed in Mar 00, but it is a mess of grain compared to the immaculate 4K presentation. Chen deliberately varies the clarity of the image from scene to scene. Some play with mildly blurry and impressionistic imagery, while others are sharp and smooth, underscoring the emotional complexity of each sequence. On the standard Blu-ray, it all has a basic grain and the back-and-forth gradations are lost. The 4K presentation holds you in its spell from start to finish.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The 5.1-channel DTS sound has delicate and crisp separations, adding greatly to the film's immersive experience. The movie is in Mandarin with optional English subtitles.

The disc is an outstanding presentation of the film by any measure, but it is made even greater by the inclusion of three exceptional supplementary pieces which appear along with a trailer on the standard BD (while the film restarts where it left off if playback is terminated, the supplements do not). The first is a 23-minute production featurette that includes substantial interviews with the stars about their performances and characters, and behind-the-scenes footage of how several of the most challenging segments of the film were shot. That is followed by an excellent 36-minute conversation between Chinese film expert Michael Berry and an exporter who brought the first films from Communist China to the art house market in America in the late Eighties, Janet Yang. They begin by discussing the 'Fifth Generation' of filmmakers who spearheaded the 'Third New Wave' of Chinese features (i.e., films from Mainland China, which followed the Waves from Hong Kong and Taiwan), and segueing into a full contextual analysis of the film and its artistry. One of the things they make note of is that the co-screenwriter, Lu Wei, patterned the film's structure somewhat recognizably after **The Last Emperor**, although they both allow as to how the characters are a great deal more appealing.

Finally, there is an amazing 18-minute interview with Chen from 1993 on *The Charlie Rose Show* that deserves an extensive deconstruction of its own. Most importantly, in addition to talking about the movie and supplying a basic context for potential American viewers, Chen talks about how, as a young teenager, he denounced his own father during the Cultural Revolution, and then reconciled with him after the madness had passed (his father served as a producer on the film). It is a very moving confession, but whom is he confessing to? In a couple of decades, Rose himself would, albeit deservedly, be denounced for cultural improprieties and lose his vocational position as a result of the denouncement, in some ways very much like the clip from the film that is shared on the show where the protagonists denounce one another. But it doesn't stop there. Chen is wearing a pop culture jacket celebrating the Warner cartoon character known as 'Taz,' a Tasmanian Devil whose shtick is to rip through an environment leaving nothing but utter devastation in his wake. It is a fascinating fashion choice to employ while promoting his film. He and Rose talk about the censorship that the Chinese government employed before the film could be screened domestically, but they never broach what the movie's initial American distributor, Miramax (under a man who would eventually undergo an even greater and more severe denouncement than what Rose experienced), did to the film initially to make it more palatable for American audiences, cutting out 14 minutes from the International version that represented Chen's full intentions (the original LD we reviewed in Nov 94 was the abridged version and it was terrible, and it was only when the DVD was released that the film's true value became apparent). Was Chen's jacket sending a subliminal message in this regard?

4K Ugetsu

The camera pans from right to left across a rural landscape in the opening shot of Kenji Mizoguchi's 1953 Ugetsu, and on the new Criterion Collection two-platter 4K Blu-ray (UPC#715515309318, \$50), the image is so sharp that your eyes, reading from left to right, create a fleeting 3D effect. On the standard Blu-ray included in the set, which we reviewed as a separate release in Oct 24 (for Halloween!), the picture, while still nice looking, is not sharp enough or detailed enough to manifest the same illusion. Throughout the 96-minute film, the improved sharpness creates an even stronger bond between the film's haunting emotional power and the viewer. With the exception of one split second displacement error in the lower left at the 53-minute mark, the presentation is perfect. Set in a pre-technological era, the film combines several short stories and fables to follow the fates of two rural couples during a time of war when they attempt to take their pottery to a busy town to profit from the mayhem. Each character is separated from the others and has a different experience, some of which are ethereal. The film is meticulously composed and the better the picture appears, the more involved you become with each character. The standard Blu-ray release was wonderful, but the 4K presentation is even more captivating.

The monophonic sound on the 4K presentation is at least as clean and sharp as the sound on the standard BD, and also adds to the film's allure. The film is in Japanese with optional English subtitles. The 4K platter also carries the excellent Tony Rayns commentary track. The standard BD also has the commentary and comes with three trailers, a 14-minute appreciation of the film, 31 minutes of interviews with various crewmembers and an outstanding 150-minute retrospective profile of Mizoguchi entitled *Kenji Mizoguchi The Life of a Film Director*. The 4K packaging also comes with an excellent booklet containing several of the short stories by Akinari Ueda and Guy de Maupassant that were adapted and integrated for the film.

The way of Flesh

An outstanding ensemble drama set in the immediate post-War slums of Tokyo, Hideo Gosha's 1988 Gate of Flesh is about a team of prostitutes living in a literally bombed out building—one yet-to-explode bomb is still dangling between two floors like a large, sinister breast—as they scrape together funds from the tricks they turn with American GIs to imagine a better future. The male yakuza gangs leave them alone out of fear for the bomb. The sets are too elaborate, the locations are too populated, the action is too furious and the sex is too explicit for the film to ever feel like a stage drama, but it conveys the same satisfactions, imbuing its characters with a vital and continually intriguing humanity.

Based upon a novel by Taijiro Tamura, the story was adapted both as a stageplay and as several previous films, including a 1964 feature directed by Seijun Suzuki that is probably better known. Rino Katase, Yūko Natori, Miyuki Kanō, Mineko Nishikawa, Senri Yamazaki and Naomi Hase star. The Toei production, released on Blu-ray by 88 Films (UPC#760137175919, \$40), runs 119 minutes, integrating the stories of several of the women and a couple of the gangsters in a melodramatic tableau that is as compelling for its emotional exposures as it is for its feminized criminal aesthetic—bright colors amid the grime, as encapsulated by meticulously dressed prostitutes plying their trade in the ashes and mud. It's Douglas Sirk meets Robert Aldrich by way of Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Even Nozomu Isumimori's musical score, which sounds fantastic on the BD's exceptionally strong monophonic audio track, seems influenced as much by the classicism of Joaquín Rodrigo as it is by the modernism of Ennio Morricone.

The film's final shot, incidentally, which accompanies the scrolling end credits, is an absolutely brilliant and sardonic capstone to the movie, and one of the all time great closing images that mean nothing whatsoever without having seen the movie preceding it. The film does not start up where it left off if playback is terminated, and is in Japanese with optional English subtitles. Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1, the picture transfer is spotless, the hues are bright and fleshtones are accurate. Along with two trailers, there is a 3-minute montage of memorabilia, a good 12-minute interview with tattoo artist Seiji Mouri about the challenge of maintaining the veracity of the painted tattoos during the rigors of filmmaking (and actors leaning back in their chairs), and a 22-minute overview of the film and its precedents.

A commentary is included with Japanese film experts Jasper Sharp and Amber T., who don't really have much to say about the production team (they fleetingly mention the cinematographer and don't address the music at all) but talk extensively about Tamura's story and its various adaptations, as well as about the American occupation of Japan and other movies depicting it, and the changes that the film's locale underwent after the economy started up again. They also discuss the film's thematic depth and its reflection of the Japanese psyche. "In film and media, sex workers are often shown as these kind of immoral, baseless people, but in this film, they're the ones upholding this moral. The men are like, 'No, we'll work with the Americans,' but the women are like, 'No, we have to help ourselves and help each other first.' I think it's a really progressive representation of prostitutes, especially coming from a time that maybe, you know, we look at this now from 2025 and we have kind of obviously very different ideas about sex work and are very much more liberal in how we look at it, but this wasn't like a 'girl boss' feminism time. This was 'doing what they needed to do to survive' and with that comes its own set of—I don't know—morals and ethics, I suppose."

Chinese family

The name of the 2000 film, Yi Yi, is translated in the subtitles and the jacket cover on the Criterion Collection Blu-ray (UPC#715515069410, \$40) as, *A One and a Two...*, and sure enough, you're going to want to watch the movie at least twice, if not many more times. The film is about the psyches and love lives of every stratum in a middle class family living in a Taipei apartment. The grandmother has a stroke and is bedridden. The father is being pressured to close business deals he is not happy with, and also reconnects with a college sweetheart. The mother is off at a retreat. The teenage daughter is acting as a go-between for her friend next door, who is becoming an accomplished cellist, and a flighty boyfriend (the friend's mother is also a piece of work). And the youngest boy has just begun to see the girl who teases him all of the time in a different light. Running a daunting 173 minutes and often presented in long and medium long shots, the film can seem uninteresting at first—too many characters, not much happening—but by about the halfway point you become totally addicted, and that is why you will want to watch the movie at least one more time, to go back to the beginning with your new knowledge of the characters and their fates, and pick up all of the nuances you missed the first time through. Directed by Edward Yang, the film does everything it can to keep the viewer distanced from the characters, but that just makes you work harder to know them and enjoy their company when you're given the opportunity to do so.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1 and the color transfer is finely detailed. The two-channel DTS sound has a compelling dimensionality that adds to the atmosphere of every scene. The film is in Mandarin and fractured English, with optional English subtitles. Along with a trailer, there is a 15-minute history of the Taiwan film business and an explanation as to how Yang's New Wave features fit into it by Asian expert Tony Rayns.

Rayns then sits down with Edward to provide a conversational commentary track for the entire running of the film, going over Edward's intentions and inspirations for specific scenes, talking about the performances and how various sequences were accomplished, and sharing many more insights and details.

"This is real rain, yes."

"Actually it was an accident, or you waited?"

"I waited. The summer was kind of a dry summer and it rained very little rain, and one day we waited and we knew it was gonna rain, so we waited and it turned out to be really heavy pouring."

"And you scripted it to be raining because this is the most emotionally turbulent day in the lives [of the characters]."

Japanese families

Two children, a teenager, two adults and an old woman live together as a family in a cramped urban shack in the 2018 Palme d'Or winner at the Cannes Film Festival, Shoplifters, a Magnolia Entertainment DVD (UPC#876964016582, \$15) directed by Kore-eda Hirokazu. Yes, they do engage in petty crimes here and there to keep the food coming in, but the real gist of the film is its exploration of what constitutes a family and the emotional bonds that develop between each of the characters with the others, individually. Running 121 minutes, most of the film sustains its entertainment with its character explorations, although in the last act there are a series of revelations regarding the backgrounds of the characters that perhaps places those dynamics in a new light, or perhaps not. In any case, the characters and their performers are all appealing and adeptly played, so that the time spent in their company remains a rewarding and even thought provoking experience. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The color transfer looks great and is hindered only by a slight softness in some of the darker portions of the screen. The 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound has a viable dimensionality that adds effectively to the movie's atmosphere. The film is in Japanese with permanent English subtitles.

Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1, the action takes place entirely within a single cramped Tokyo apartment in the amusing 1962 Japanese comedy about a family of con artists, Elegant Beast, a Radiance Films Blu-ray (UPC#760137141068, \$40). Directed by Yuzo Kawashima, the wonderful horizontal framings are often broken up with walls and windows to separate characters, and there are vertical and diagonal separations as well. Sometimes a character will just be in a small triangular slice of a space above a shelf in an upper corner of the screen. Hence, the film is as enjoyable for Kawashima's inventive blocking as it is for its stageplay-like narrative. As the film opens, the husband and wife are busily dressing down their apartment, to make them look poorer than they already are. They finish just in time for their visitors—their son's boss, the office accountant and one of the office clients, who claim the son has been embezzling payments. Running 96 minutes, the parade of visitors arriving or returning continues—the daughter is the mistress to a successful writer, and the son has been borrowing from him as well—and it soon becomes apparent that the family is also being scammed by one of the other characters. Over the course of 24 hours, a lot of things happen and not much happens, but you do get to know all of the characters, and from their conversations, you can vividly imagine their lives and problems. The comedy is subdued, but ever-present, and the film is pretty much a textbook example of constructing a rich and entertaining feature with minimal resources and maximum creativity.

The color transfer is solid. The image is not glossy, of course, but the source material is free of wear. The monophonic sound is okay and the film is in Japanese with optional English subtitles. Along with a trailer, there is an excellent 17-minute introduction to Kawashima ("His films had a wonderful lightness and brightness, and a sense of speed."), the cast and the characters; an insightful 14-minute appreciation of the film; and a terrific 12-minute analysis of the film's historical context (such as Japan's housing challenges after the War) and stylistic accomplishments.

Delightful colors

Nothing prepares one—certainly not the undistinguished jacket art—for the remarkable children's film released on Blu-ray by The Criterion Collection, Takashi Murakami's 2013 **Jellyfish Eyes** (UPC#715515161817, \$40). Sadly, the disc does not have an English language audio track, so its constituency is unnecessarily limited to older kids and open-minded adults, but the film, also known as *Mememe No Kurage* (it is simply coincidental that the Japanese word for jellyfish, kurage, matches the English word, courage, although the link applies to the film's story), will have one dependable fan base—those who have very large screens and like colorful images. Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1, the transfer is exceptional, even in the high-end world of Criterion Blu-ray transfers. Every edge is sharp, every hue is vivid, and the presentation is spectacular, not just during its fantasy sequences, but even the simple shots of green fields and trees.

Running 101 minutes, the movie begins innocently and commonly enough, with a boy and his recently widowed mother driving to their new home. He catches a brief glimpse of a small but fantastical creature flying above their car, and when he arrives at their new apartment, the creature, who looks like the Pillsbury Doughboy, but with a jellyfish-ish umbrella hat seemingly made of white tobacco leaves, follows him inside, asking for string cheese. He hides the creature in his backpack, brings him to school on his first day in his new classroom, and just when you think the film is going to turn into one more **E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial** ripoff, it turns out that unbeknownst to the teacher, every kid in the class has a different and often mischievous creature with them. So the movie ends up moving closer to *The Great Yokai War* (Jan 22), but the important thing is, the film is constantly imaginative and quite delightful. Unlike movies that pander to kids, the emotions the children express are always believably real and unguarded. Some of the kids are vicious, and so are their creatures. The plot—the same scientists that created the creatures are villains looking to tap negative energy from the kids—builds to quite a grand finale, but it is continually witty (oh yeah, some of those creatures are so adorable they make Pikachu seem like a pet rock), exciting and imaginative. Backed up by the amazing color transfer, the film is the distillation of what is best about every children's film ever, with none of the usual baggage to remind you why you don't like kiddie films any more.

The film is in Japanese with optional English subtitles. The 5.1-channel DTS sound has a few cool directional effects and while it is not overly stimulating in the way that the picture is, it serves the film adequately. After the end credit scroll, there is a teaser for a very different but even more spectacular *Jellyfish Eyes 2*, and Criterion also includes a trailer for the sequel in the supplement, but sadly no one has yet had the impetus to release the film on another Blu-ray. Also featured is a very nice 23-minute interview with Murakami explaining how the film was gestated, and 56 minutes of terrific behind-the-scenes footage showing the artists working on the crazy models and the live action shoot, as well as story and design conferences (at one point they argue about whether or not the film should have a happy ending—like, duh).

Chan emerges

Long before he began performing death-defying stunts in front of the camera and long before he brought a martial arts attitude to contemporary cop films, Jackie Chan began by making period Chinese kung fu features, and since he was not facially sculpted like Bruce Lee, he turned, as men who can't get by on just their looks often do, to humor. Five such films that Chan made in the late Seventies and early Eighties, along with his first contemporary cop feature (**Project A**, which is not part of the set, was still a period film), are presented on the four-platter Criterion Collection Blu-ray set, **Jackie Chan Emergence of a Superstar** (UPC#715515289115, \$125).

The initial five films are all letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. All of the films in the collection are monophonic in Cantonese with optional English subtitles and all come with alternate English dubbed tracks. All of them also have an alternate Cantonese track, mostly in 5.1-channel DTS sound, which must be selected because the default is the mono track.

The opening film may be tough going for some viewers because it is an out-and-out comedy without the refinements that would mature his later movies (most of the time) and balance the humor. The 1978 Lo Wei Motion Picture Company production, **Half a Loaf of Kung Fu!**, directed by Chi-Hwa Chan (no relation to Jackie), begins with a very amusing parody of a Shaw Bros. opening credit sequence—abstract images of the star or stars performing martial arts by themselves or against opponents—that begins with Chan acting like a lazy bum, and then incorporates spoofs of Zatoichi, **Jesus Christ, Superstar** and other cinematic icons. The story itself is simple enough—Chan's character, while learning kung fu over the course of the film, presents himself as a master and is taken on by an escorting service to help guard a valuable shipment of jewels, while gangs of all shapes and sizes try to grab the goods—and is presented in a hyper-comical style, with sped up frame rates, slapstick violence

and many, many gags about bodily functions. Running 96 minutes, the movie is rescued only by the wit of the actual fighting sequences and Chan's impressive acrobatic talents, essentially making his purposefully inept fighting style as effective (and dazzling) as any more supposedly elegant fighter might be.

The colors are fresh, and while the source material looks like it is on the verge of falling apart at any moment, it remains both stable and relatively smooth. By any measure, it is a substantial improvement over the cropped presentation on DVD from Simitar that we reviewed in Dec 97, even though the improvements do not enhance the entertainment. Also featured are two trailers and a nice 10-minute overview of Chan's appeal that includes a steady montage of stunts and fights in clips not only from this boxed set, but from Criterion's **Police Story** set (Jul 19) and stills from lots of other Chan films.

Assume, hypothetically, that someone who has never seen a Jackie Chan film before has purchased Criterion's collection as an introduction to the actor's artistry, and has not, after the first film, gone running back to the store to demand a refund. There are, after all, innumerable indications within **Half a Loaf of Kung Fu!** that Chan's athleticism is, at the very least, intriguing and different. And then comes the second feature in the collection, Wei Lo's 1978 Lo Wei production, **Spiritual Kung Fu**. It, too, begins comically, but with substantially more refinement than **Half a Loaf**. Chan's character, unshorn, is a low level employee, for want of a better word, at a monastery, and is being trained by the monks in the age-old classical way of training, making him do chores that build up his strength and dexterity without his realizing it. Friends come to the wall of the monastery and tease him with food while his hands are tied to a heavy plank across his shoulders, and without missing a beat, he catches each piece of food in his mouth. Rather than a mindless narrative about protecting jewels, a Least Likely Suspect steals an important manual and passes it to an outsider who wants to become the greatest kung fu master, thus turning the movie into a viable mystery, where an innocent person is accused of the theft and subsequent murders. At the same time, Chan's character uncovers a long lost manual that essentially trumps the other manual and with the help of several ethereal spirits, rapidly improves his skills. Yes, the spirits are comical and there is plenty of physical slapstick, but the vectors of the outsider character and Chan's character are clearly going to meet at some point, and that, plus the viable whodunit, is enough to sustain an interest in the 98-minute film up to the final half hour.

And then, in that final half hour, which is made up of almost constant fighting scenes, the true nature of Chan's appeal is put on full display and you realize you are not watching a funny Bruce Lee, you're watching a Fred Astaire who can knock down any man in the room. Chan's intricate, carefully timed moves are relentless and amazing—there can be a dozen blows between cuts—and it is never the same move over and over, but constantly different arm movements, leg movements and body positions. In one sequence, he faces off against eighteen pole fighters lined up in a row, and he dispenses with each one quickly and differently. The lack of redundancy underscores the imaginative vitality that makes Chan's films—and in retrospect, even **Half a Loaf**—inherently entertaining regardless of their dramatic content. And since, with editing, the fights are even more dazzling and complex works of unique cinematic art, the films attached to them are exceptional works of entertainment.

James Tien, Wen-Siu Wu and Tong-Chun Li co-star. The color transfer is a solid and free of impediments. The camera lenses distort the edges of the image at times, and the double exposed spirits create exaggerated hazes and other impurities, but the presentation is a viable representation of the original production and is in much better condition than previous efforts have appeared. This time the improved picture transfer adds greatly to the entertainment in comparison to the pathetic Simitar DVD we reviewed in Mar 98. The widescreen image enhances the dynamics of the action significantly, while the improved color transfer enables a greater emotional connection to the narrative. Also featured is a trailer, a 4-minute segment on the fighting styles in the film that includes a brief interview with Chan, and a passable 10-minute summary of Lo's career as a director, with more great clips.

Chan himself directed the 1979 Goodyear Movie Company production, **The Fearless Hyena**, which does not have the elaborate narrative (or setting) that made **Spiritual Kung Fu** exceptional, but presents another viable blend of humor and serious fighting. The grandfather of Chan's character is in hiding because a villain wants to kill him, and he forbids Chan's character from showing off his fighting skills, so as not to alert the bad guys, but in order to make money, Chan's character inevitably begins to use what he knows, and eventually the villain gets wind of it. Meanwhile, however, the fights are once again highly elaborate and creative, even as the characters pretend to be sloppy or confused, so that not only is Chan doing innumerable moves within a single take, he is 'acting' at the same time, sometimes with purposely exaggerated emotions (indeed, some of the fight moves are keyed by the declared emotion) and sometimes with genuine reactions to the drama. Running 97 minutes, the film delivers on its promises and is wholly satisfying even as its story shifts from humor to tragedy.

Other than a few briefly glimpsed extras, there are no female characters. Tien, Shi-Kwan Yen, Lee Kwan, Hui-Lou Chen and Fu-Hung Cheng costar. The color transfer is in excellent condition again, removing the impediments to the entertainment that were present in the Simitar DVD we reviewed in Dec 97, although even cropped and poorly colored, the film was still plenty of fun. Two trailers are included.

Hong Kong film expert Frank Djeng, speaking very quickly to squeeze

everything in, supplies an excellent commentary track, covering the backgrounds of the cast and the crew, identifying the many voice actors substituting the actors on the screen, explaining the film's cultural nuances, deconstructing the narrative and fight choreography, noting the differences in how Chan was spelling his first name in the earlier films compared to the later ones, and going over the many idiosyncrasies of Hong Kong filmmaking. "Now you hear the music of Henry Mancini's **The Pink Panther** theme music, which I'm pretty sure the filmmakers didn't get cleared to use. Back then, the idea of requesting permission from the music copyright owner to use his library was almost nonexistent. The filmmaker would just use his Hollywood library music, whichever was most appropriate for the scene, without ever thinking about asking for permission or clearance to use it, and many times when the music's rightful owner finds out about its non-copyrighted use or unauthorized use in a film like this they try to contact the producer or the filmmaking company by calling Hong Kong only to get a response from someone who doesn't speak a word of English. So during the Seventies and Eighties, it was almost impossible for owners of the music of Hollywood films to ask the Hong Kong filmmakers not to use them or have them go through the proper procedures to clear it. Music clearance is no longer an issue now."

A sequel in name only, the 1983 Lo Wei production, **Fearless Hyena II**, has many of the same actors, including Tien, Yen and Chen, often in the same makeup and costumes, but the characters are entirely different and the film is something of a mess. As Djeng explains during his commentary on the first film, the movie was a patchwork job to cash in on Chan's popularity and Chan pretty much disowned it, although it was quite profitable. There is a vague narrative about a pair of villains looking for the father of Chan's character so they can kill him, but the film is kind of pasted together so that the story takes enormous, unexplained leaps from one situation to the next, and you only keep up with it because the entire thing is so mindless. That would be fine if the fight scenes were innovative, but they, too, are pretty much a reiteration of what was done in the initial **Hyena** feature. Directed by Chuen Chan (no relation to Jackie), you can spot a lot of the same moves and even the same combinations. Additional creativity is minimal. The editing in the fight scenes is also off tangent, so that there is no logic in the punches and counter-punches—instead, it looks like the fighters are deliberately missing one another. The final act in the 91-minute feature, in which another character sets traps in a bamboo forest for the villains, followed by the big final duel, isn't bad, but getting there will require a great deal of patience or a complete Jackie Chan fanaticism.

The picture looks fine and its only flaws are instigated by the cinematography and not the image transfer, again a substantial improvement over the Simitar DVD we reviewed in Mar 98 (although we enjoyed the film a little more at the time, perhaps because we assumed we were missing more than we were actually missing). There are two different English language tracks offered.

Chan directed the very enjoyable 1980 Golden Harvest production, *The Young Master*, which dazzles the viewer with its opening sequence—a lion costume battle in a town square—and then continues to present creative and witty fights and stunts throughout the 107-minute feature, which appears by itself on the third platter. His character is also on the receiving end of the blows throughout the film. He loses the lion fight, is kicked out of his kung fu school (and family), is mistaken for a bank robber (while still taking place in a pre-technological setting, the film has a more contemporary feeling to it than the previous films) and much abused by his captors, and then gets beaten to a pulp in the final and lengthy one-on-one fight with the villain, although he ultimately triumphs. Nevertheless, he never loses his sense of humor, and the fighting combinations become more complex and inventive as they go along. Yuen costars, and the meticulously timed sparring they do together is especially impressive. Perhaps it helps to come to the film after the ineptitudes of **Fearless Hyena II**, but every aspect of the filmmaking is stronger, tighter and more engaging.

The color transfer looks great. There is an 8-minute interview with Chan talking about how things got easier for him as a director as his films became successful; 8 minutes of interesting deleted scenes; 9 minutes of great silent bloopers; a 13-minute silent abridgment of the film highlighting several fight sequences; a trailer; and a terrific 28-minute interview with costar and martial arts expert In-shik Hwang, who assisted in training a number of Hong Kong stars in his particular style of fighting, and shares his memories of becoming involved with the movies.

Djeng supplies another excellent commentary track, going over the careers of many members of the cast and the crew, explaining cultural references, contextualizing the translations of the Chinese dialog and texts, discussing the film's production history and deconstructing individual scenes and fights. "You notice that they have black duct tape on the hilt of the swords. That is to help absorb the hand sweats because of the humidity. Hong Kong is very humid, especially during like spring or summertime. Now note the use of baskets behind them, apparently to hide some modern structure on the road. Also note that railing there that looks awfully too modern."

Chan appears in the first 12 minutes of the 1985 contemporary action comedy from Golden Harvest, *My Lucky Stars*, and then does not reappear, except for one brief scene, until the final 20 minutes. The sequences where he does appear are fantastic. He plays a Hong Kong cop chasing after international criminals in Japan. The chases are on par with his **Police Story** films, and his fights are equally terrific. The middle hour of the 97-minute feature, however, stars director Sammo Hung (who appeared as a villain for one fight in **Half a**

Loaf of Kung Fu!) with an ensemble of comedians, Eric Tsang, Richard Ng, Charlie Chin and Stanley Fung. Since he can't trust the police, Chan's character recruits the group—mostly childhood friends who are now all drifters and hustlers—to infiltrate the Tokyo mob. Most of that hour, however, is comprised of Hung's character gathering the group together, and it is filled with slapstick gags and juvenile character humor. Here and there, a bit is amusing or a stunt is reasonably impressive and energized, but it can try the patience of viewers who were hoping for more action and less comedy. Sibelle Hu costars as the group's handler (their obsession over her is the basis for much of the attempted humor) and Bolo Yeung has a brief part.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1, and the color transfer is impeccable. The image is sharp, bright and glossy. The alternate stereo soundtrack has just two channels, but still sustains a decent dimensionality and clarity. The film is presented by itself on the fourth platter and comes with two trailers; 22 minutes of terrific silent bloopers; an interesting 21-minute interview with costar Michiko Nishiwaki, talking about her career, working with the different cast members, and the fight scenes; and a great 18-minute interview with Hung talking about making *Lucky Stars* (he would only sleep on the ride to and from the set) and a couple of other films (with more wonderful clips), and explaining the challenges of various stunts.

Two phases of Cheh Chang's lengthy career

Two Shaw Bros. films that share an English translated word in their titles have been paired on the single-platter Celestial Pictures and Eureka! Blu-ray, **The Magnificent Chang Cheh** (UPC#760137177906, \$40). Both films are set in pre-technological times and combine terrific martial arts sequences with adeptly conveyed star power. Both movies are letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and are in Mandarin with optional English subtitles.

The storytelling is immediately grabbing in the Chang's 1966 *The Magnificent Trio*. A swordsman returning from battle sees three men tying up a woman and steps in to save her, only to learn that her abduction is justified. From there the plot advances with more characters and plenty of interesting twists and turns, so that by the time the characters you have invested in begin to die, you are too involved to be alienated by the tragedies. There are many lyrical fight scenes, several pleasing romantic interludes, wonderfully composed soundstage sets that are not over decorated but dressed just enough to transport the imagination, and a few carefully chosen outdoor sequences, including a widescreen shot at the end that places two characters as little more than discernible pinpoints on the opposite edges of the wide screen. Chang's filmmaking is thrilling, but his storytelling is also masterful, so that even when the heroes know the villain is going to go back on his word, more than once during the 109-minute feature, they are logically compelled to follow through with the deals they have made with him to save others. Jimmy Wang Yu, Feng Ku, and Ming Lui star, with Feng Tien, Lieh Lo and Margaret Tu Chuan.

Although the cinematography is out of focus at times, to a point of irritation, the image transfer is lovely, with accurate fleshtones and bright hues, and when the picture is sharp, the details are carefully defined. The monophonic sound is crisp, and the delivery is mostly satisfying, although the high end is raspy from time to time. Hong Kong film experts Frank Djeng and Michael Worth provide a viable commentary track, pointing out that not only was this Chang's fourth film, it was his first color film and the earliest martial arts movie that is still available (an earlier one is lost). Along with supplying more extensive career information only for cast members who haven't appeared in many other films they've done commentaries for, and deconstructing the basics of the movie's drama and composition, they focus on the Chang's budding stylistic innovations and how he was changing the nature of martial arts films. "We're at this phase where we switched over from, or we are in the process of switching over from the choreography of the earlier films that had been surviving since 1928, which is modeled on the Shanghai School of Peking Opera, the Northern styles, and then the second style of martial arts, which Chang Cheh essentially felt—he's not entirely wrong—were attributed to both him and King Hu."

The second film, *Magnificent Wanderers*, is a completely unrelated 1977 comedy—nobody dies—with Robin Hood aspirations. Alexander Fu Sheng, Kuan-Chun Chi and Yi-Min Li are three street hustlers who team up with a wealthy rebel (he shoots gold marbles from a bow at people, distracting them as much as hurting them as they scramble to find the balls on the ground after they've been hit) played by David Chiang to fight a corrupt government official and his hopeless lackeys. The official has an irritating stutter, but otherwise the comedy is palatable, and the martial arts are unharmed by the film's tone. Indeed, the enthusiasm with which the heroes bash the bad guys is the foundation of the film's charm. Running 98 minutes, the story sort of breaks off where a sequel ought to begin, but it is an enjoyable blend of humor and action, strengthened substantially by the personalities of the characters—another reason a sequel would have been most welcome.

Again, the transfer is excellent, and this time the cinematography is in focus, but filters are employed at times that give the image a kind of shadowy tone. Nevertheless, colors are accurate and the image is crisp. The sound is very nicely defined and has a decent bass for its day. Hong Kong film enthusiasts Arne Venema and Michael Worth supply an entertaining, conversational commentary track. Although they go on many enjoyable digressions, they do talk about the movie, the cast and the crew, and explain the basic dynamic that created the film—Chang had made a couple of boxoffice disappointments and

was thrown into a period of doubt while the entire industry was going through a number of changes.

"It's not Chang Cheh's best."

"It's interesting to see where he was, and as a transitional film, as a piece that you look at and go, 'This is what happens to a filmmaker that was at the top of his game and got knocked off.'"

"He was unsure, suddenly, and the genre was changing."

Fortunately, he would recover his mojo and make many more terrific films.

Also featured on the platter is an excellent 29-minute deconstruction of Chang's filmmaking techniques, using the two films for comparative examples, showing Chang's effective use of strategies such as foreground framing, symmetrical composition, slow motion, whip pans, zooms and so on.

The Ladies of Shaw Bros.

Since the 1975 Shaw Bros. production, **Lady of the Law**, runs 90 minutes on the dot, it seems clear that the filmmakers themselves were the ones who trimmed out scenes to keep the story moving, as the narrative leaps precipitously from one story advancement to the next. The story jumps are mitigated by two factors, however. One is that the plot is still very easy to follow—you never need more than a split second to figure out what is going on—and the other is that the movie is so enjoyable, the only regret for the missing scenes is that they would clearly be just as much fun as what has been left in and this is a movie you would happily spend a couple of hours with. Indeed, as 'The End' appears, you immediately long for a sequel.

Released on Blu-ray by Celestial Pictures and 88 Films (UPC#760137167709, \$40), Rushuang Leng plays the title character, a sort of roving vigilante who works with each locality's law enforcement to bring villains to justice during a non-technological era. The film's hero is played by Lieh Lo (the two met as children, but have since been separated), a flunky in a bodyguard business who has secretly mastered the kung fu taught to the other bodyguards while he does cleaning chores. When the boss's evil son rapes and kills the mistress of another boss, the son plants the blame on Lo's character, and he must escape and prove his innocence, while Leng's character is on his trail. Directed by Chang Shen, the fights are acrobatic and enjoyable, there is a little bit of nudity and the story is composed to keep the viewer in suspense and delight every step of the way. Additionally, while the costumes are not flowery, they are carefully color coordinated, so that not only can you differentiate when a mass of good guys and bad guys are battling, but the screen is always lit with captivating hues, like a garden. Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1, the image is very fresh and free of wear, so that the film is as visually pleasing as it is dramatically entertaining.

The monophonic sound is in Mandarin with optional English subtitles and is also in good condition. A 4-minute montage of nice promotional stills is also included.

Asian film authority David West supplies a commentary track, but it is of limited value. He spends most of the time reeling off the credits for the cast members and has very little to say about the movie at hand, other than blaming some of the story leaps on production difficulties. However, he even mistakenly claims that something doesn't occur in the final battle that most certainly does occur, although the gist of what he is saying about the story not following through on things is valid.

Gender equality is readily achieved in the simple but entertaining 1971 Shaw Bros. martial arts feature, **Lady with a Sword**, a Celestial Pictures 88 Films Blu-ray (UPC#760137175889, \$30). A rarity for Shaw Bros., the film was directed by a female, Pao-Shu Kao, and has both a gratifying, straightforward visual style and distinctive editing that clarifies and advances every sequence. There are male and female villains and heroes, all highly and equally skilled at swordplay, leaping about in defiance of gravity. A couple of them are outright evil, but most are torn between familial loyalty and moral sensibility. The linear story pushes the plot along from one tragedy or fight to the next, with blood spraying all over the place. Lily Ho stars, seeking to avenge her sister's sexual assault and murder, only to discover, eventually, that the young man who committed the crime is her fiancé, even though they haven't seen one another since childhood. After encounters, conflicts and ambushes at an inn, she follows him back to his home and confronts his family. The moral dilemma she faces between the honor she owes her sister and the honor she owes her future husband and his family enriches the dramatic validity of the action that follows. Unfortunately, while the story does not exactly paint itself into a corner, most of the characters, even the likable ones, are dead by the end. Be that as it may, the 89-minute film is highly entertaining as it plays out because of the manner in which the story advances, the ferocity and numerosity of the fights, and the exceptionally clear emotional constructs of every character, male and female.

Seok-Hoon Nam, Shieh Wang, Yuen-Man Meng and Chih Hsien Po co-star. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The color transfer is excellent and the image is spotless. The only flaws in the presentation are the problematic camera lenses Shaw Bros. employed now and then. The monophonic sound is clear and the film is in Mandarin with optional English subtitles. A 2-minute montage of promotional stills is also included. West provides a workable commentary track. He seems a bit less informed than the best commentators, but he knows all of the basics and talks about the cast, the crew and the film's innovative feminine perspective, including how that affects

the dynamics of duty and honor.

A clever 1983 Shaw Bros. production that updates kung fu films for a new generation of viewers, **The Lady Is the Boss** includes, among other things, a fight where the heroes use BMX bikes and the villains wield construction tools. Kar-Leung Lau directed the entertaining feature, released on Blu-ray by Celestial Pictures and 88 Films (UPC#760137167679, \$30), which takes a standard narrative template—trying to protect their kung fu school, the heroes run afoul of gangsters—and dresses it in modern times. In one amusing scene, bar girls who have been to the school, practice what they have learned on their grabby customers. When the school's leader is unable to come to Hong Kong from America to address the issues it is facing, his young but talented daughter arrives instead, mixing English with her Cantonese (many of her line readings are positively poetic) and showing no deference to age or maleness. Kara Hui stars, and her fighting movements are as frisky and invigorating as her line readings. Running 97 minutes, the film may be little more than a string of fabulously inventive and energetic fight scenes staged in contemporary settings, but the stars are appealing, the story is sort of valid enough to justify the action, and the film feels like nothing you've ever seen before even if, on close examination, you've seen it a thousand times.

Lau also costars, along with Gordon Liu (they make inspired fun of his monk image), Wong Yu and Robert Mak. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. Well lit indoor shots demonstrate that the picture transfer is excellent, with fresh, accurate hues, and there is no damage to the source material, but the cinematography is a strain at times, looking very hazy or otherwise mishandled. The monophonic sound is okay, and there are optional English subtitles. Along with a trailer, there is a 3-minute montage of promotional photos and a 14-minute introduction to Lau's breakthrough martial arts features.

Hong Kong film expert Frank Djeng provides a thorough commentary going into Lau's career and Hui's background, and profiling the other members of the cast and the crew, as well as digressing into various reflections on the different Hong Kong locations appearing in the film, the nature and hierarchies of martial arts schools and clubs, and the film's plot turns. "The writer wastes an opportunity to really let a strong female actress like Hui take center stage in the finale, and makes you think why Lau felt like he had to fall back on the same old 'damsel in distress plot, hero to the rescue' thing, but thanks to the quality of the martial arts action here and everyone's wonderful performances, the film's narrative deficits can sometimes be overlooked."

Ichikawa cool

Along with playing ultra-cool samurai and ninja heroes in his other films, Raizo Ichikawa also plays ultra-ultra-cool hitmen in two 1967 Dai-ichi features directed by Kazuo Mori and released on a single-platter Blu-ray by Arrow Video, **A Certain Killer / A Killer's Key** (UPC# 760137170556, \$40). Not only is Ichikawa totally awesome, but the films have a wonderful, Sixties tone and style that are transporting and engrossing even without the very clever narratives. Although he appears to be a different character in the two films (he has a different name in each one, and a different 'civilian' skill to hide his true identity), there are still great similarities between the characters—they both kill their marks by quickly poking a needle in the victim's spine—and produced just months apart, the two films make an ideal double bill.

Both films are letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. Both movies have a kind of grimy atmosphere at times, but are still stylistically compelling and have decent looking color transfers that are free of significant flaws. On both, the monophonic sound is fine, and both films are in Japanese with optional English subtitles.

Running 82 minutes, **A Certain Killer** introduces Ichikawa's character as a skilled chef and the owner of a restaurant, who has rented a room in a remote shack-like building next to a graveyard, looking out over a desolate urban landscape. The film cuts between him and his companions waiting to do the job they have planned, and flashbacks showing how they met and what the job will be. The thing is, the flashbacks initially lead you down one path, so there is a surprise and a twist halfway through. Ichikawa's character is steely and reserved, and is two steps ahead of everyone around him. He is also capable of defending himself if things don't go his way. Basically, he just stares at you from the screen and you are hooked, ready to bask in whatever trick he's going to pull.

Japanese film expert Tony Rayns supplies a commentary track, explaining as best he can the narrative's chronology, going over Dai-ichi's passion for creating 'series' films, discussing the film's production history and pointing out its artistic merits—he notes that there are visual and narrative similarities to **Le Samurái** (Aug 24), which was being made simultaneously in France at the time—but he spends most of his talk going into extensive detail about the rather short but richly rewarding (for movie fans) life and career of Ichikawa.

There are no clever flashbacks in **A Killer's Key**, just a totally involving step-by-step narrative that swings even closer to **Le Samurái**, as Ichikawa's character, a dance instructor, is hired to do an assassination, only to have the people who hired him try to kill him afterwards. In response, he works his way up their hierarchy, death by death, to find out who was behind it all. The ending could have been more clever than it is, but otherwise, the 71-minute film is brisk, totally absorbing, and still really, really cool.

Rayns talks for a total of 46 minutes over **Killer's Key**, in two

segments, the first starting at the beginning and the second starting at the 42-minute mark. He has a bit to say about the movie and how its narrative structure differs from **Certain Killer**, but he spends most of his time talking about Mori, who had an exceptional career as a workhorse director, making over a hundred films that were mostly studio formula pictures but, as Rayns explains, invariably stood out for their efficient and clearly expressed storytelling. “Mori doesn’t have a style. There is no distinctive approach to shooting films that you could identify as characteristic of him. [His] films are different. They’re in different genres. They behave differently. They have different kinds of plot, and they call for different solutions. Mori was definitely a director who adapted himself to the challenges of the scripts that he was handed by Daiei, and came up with different solutions according to the script. What is consistent in his work, whether it is historical or modern day, whether it’s exaggerated, whether it’s comic or serious, whether it’s a thriller or an action film, is a certain keenness of the direction. He lets his images do the talking, from film to film. It’s a characteristic. It’s a very non-specific characteristic, because we can’t point to a particular camera style, but it is true, that if you look at this film, it looks nothing at all like other films [the cinematographer, Kazuo Miyagawa] shot at Daiei.”

Trailers for both films are also included, along with a small collection of promotional photos in still frame for each movie and a generalized 33-minute introduction to the films that suggest the primary creative force behind them was screenwriter Yasuzō Masumura.

Brute force

Hiroki Matsukata plays an indefatigable convict in Sadao Nakajima’s surprisingly entertaining 1974 action drama released on Blu-ray by Radiance, **The Rapacious Jailbreaker** (UPC#760137179375, \$40). To begin right at the end, the film has the best final moment ever for a prison movie, and it is the combination of directorial wit and the perseverance of Matsukata’s character in that scene that reflects the irresistible nature of 97-minute film as a whole, regardless of the brutality and gore that occurs along the way. Set shortly after the end of World War II, Matsukata’s character is initially sent to prison for the murder of a drug dealer, but over the course of the film he manages to escape several times, always increasing the length of his sentence but making him that much more determined to get out again. The film does not gloss over the nastiness of prison life that even earlier Japanese films soft pedaled, but carried along by Matsukata’s charisma and the promise of repeated short term successes in his endeavors, the film has an overriding ‘bring it on’ mentality that will bemuse even the most jaded viewers.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. Prisons are dank and dreary places, but for what it is worth, the color transfer is decent and fleshtones are accurate. The monophonic sound is very clean—you can hear the whirring of the cameras in the winter scenes, although in summer it is drowned out by the cicadas—and there is a decent, Lalo Schiffrin-style musical score by Kenjiro Hirose. The film is in Japanese with optional English subtitles and comes with an informative 17-minute overview of Nakajima’s entire career that includes many terrific clips from other films. Japanese film expert Nathan Stuart provides a passable commentary track, talking about the careers of Nakajima, Matsukata and other members of the cast, and talking about Japanese prison movies, as well as the cycle of yakuza films that was occurring at around the same time. He cites **Papillon** as one of the film’s inspirations, but never mentions **Cool Hand Luke**. There is one point near the end of the talk where either Stuart repeats himself word for word or a brief passage was run twice to cover something up (he does explain that his dog was making a ruckus), but otherwise he does a good job analyzing the film’s drama and placing it in the context of other Japanese films at the time. And he concurs with us in regards to the final shot. “I absolutely love the ending. I think it perfectly caps off the film.”

Relax, take a train

Here is a handy axiom: Any movie that has ‘bullet train’ in its title is guaranteed to be entertaining. A case in point would be the granddaddy of them all, the original 1975 Toei production directed by Junya Sato, **Bullet Train**, which was released on Blu-ray by Twilight Time (UPC#811956021472). An epic combination of a disaster film and a police procedural that runs a whopping 153 minutes, the film is nevertheless fully engrossing and highly entertaining. You’ve heard the plot before since they sort of lifted it a couple of decades later for **Speed**. An extortionist played by Ken Takakura affixes a bomb to the wheels of a bullet train so that it will explode is the train slows below a certain speed, and then makes arrangements to obtain a ransom in exchange for instructions on deactivating it. Sonny Chiba plays the train’s mostly cool-headed motorman. The film essentially cuts back and forth between the passengers on the train becoming more and more panicky and the police frantically tracking down clues and leads while Takakura’s character stays one step ahead of them. In addition to developing portraits of several of the characters, there is also a cogent political argument about the responsibilities for protecting the passengers and any members of the public that might be nearby in the case of an explosion. There are so many opportunities for suspense and thrills that the movie could really go on even longer, but it is a marvelous and clever journey filled with intrigue and excitement, all fully geeked out by a **Taking of Pelham One Two Three** look at how the bullet trains are managed and what goes into keeping them running smoothly. For viewers that find those sequences fascinating, the rest of the film is one bonus after another.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The

color transfer looks fresh and fleshtones are accurate, but the image is a little soft much of the time, and a stray speckle pops up now and then. The film is in Japanese with optional English subtitles. The monophonic sound is solidly delivered and there is a second audio track that eliminates the dialog, bringing an even stronger delivery of the sound effects and Hachiro Aoyama’s musical score. Also featured is a very rewarding 24-minute interview with Sato, who provides a comprehensive understanding of how the film was conceived, cast and shot (they had to steal images from inside a real train, among other things).

Detective Dee returns

Just as Tsui Hark’s 2013 prequel, **Young Detective Dee Rise of the Sea Dragon** (Dec 15) was exponentially more elaborate and spectacular than his original 2010 **Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame** (Dec 11), so too is Hark’s 2018 sequel to the prequel, **Detective Dee The Four Heavenly Fathers**, released on a DVD + Blu-ray by Well Go USA Entertainment (UPC# 810348030214, \$30), exponentially more advanced in spectacle and action than its predecessor. Mark Chao reprises his role as the titular hero (replacing Andy Lau from the first film, which is why the narratives had to be restarted), essentially in charge of the emperor’s security and investigating an elaborate plot against him that turns out to be even more elaborate than initially supposed. While the first film danced around the supernatural, this one dives right in, presenting elaborate illusions and dangers that appear out of the mist but have very real and deadly consequences. At one point the heroes are attacked by an enormous dragon, and in another sequence they battle a huge, multi-eyed and multi-tentacled monster. A white ape the size of King Kong is on their side. The film is essentially equivalent to an **Avengers** feature, without the snappy one liners, but with an enhanced sense of spiritual power in the essential conflict between good and evil. Like its predecessors, the appeal of the film is in the quick-thinking actions of the hero, who has a Sherlock Holmes-type intellect and can deconstruct a crime scene with no more than a quick glance. The film runs 132 minutes and builds to a suitably grand finale, but every moment of it is an exciting pleasure, whether it is in the display of the hero’s deductive skills, the fantastic martial arts that remain exhilarating and athletically impressive regardless of how much they have been augmented by computers, or the dizzying story twists and turns that are five steps ahead of what you have just figured out—at one point, two sets of soldiers are fiercely fighting one another and you are trying to determine which ones are the good guys and which are the bad guys because what you thought apparently wasn’t the case, until Chao’s character steps in and stops the fight because indeed, the villain used his powers of illusion to set the good guys against each other. **Sea Dragon** was an impressive blend of wit and spectacle, but the half-decade in improvements to special effects have made **Four Heavenly Fathers** an even more thrilling and satisfying production that is as grand and engaging as anything Hollywood could ever achieve.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The colors are bright and sharp, and the graphic effects are seamless. The audio mix has some wonderful directional effects, including dialog shooting to the sides, and a decent bass, but the Blu-ray’s 5.1-channel Dolby Digital delivery doesn’t do it complete justice, especially since the Dolby Atmos logo appears quite prominently in the end credit scroll. The film is in Mandarin with optional English subtitles and is accompanied by two trailers. The DVD included in the set is still a great deal of fun, but the film was made for Blu-ray delivery and there really is no going back.

Karma’s gonna get you

A rip-roaring 2008 Hong Kong action feature with touches of the supernatural that ends up going as dark as **Se7en**, Johnny To and Ka-fai Wai’s **Running on Karma**, has been released by Fortune Star and Eureka! as a **The Masters of Cinema Collection** Blu-ray (UPC#760137171737, \$40). The film opens on a gruesome crime scene, where the police find the killer hiding in a can about the size of a wastebasket. That scene is intercut, however, with a scene set in a male strip club, where a stripper with enormous muscles, played by Andy Lau, is dancing in front of a group of enthusiastic ladies, including an undercover cop played by Cecilia Cheung. The two stories converge rather quickly, however, when the killer escapes. Running 93 minutes, the film’s narrative tends to leap forward, and sometimes backward, in time without much in the way of demarcation, so the further it goes the more concentration it requires. The action scenes are thrilling. Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1, the image is slick and glossy, and the Cantonese audio track has a pounding two-channel stereo mix with many directional effects. The characters fight, clamor up walls, bend metal and leap impossible lengths, but it all remains within the logic of the story being told. Unfortunately, the story takes a very dark turn in the third act, and while it raises the film’s artistic content to a higher spiritual level, those who bought into it because of the visceral thrills in the beginning will find the karma of their enthusiasm coming back to bite them in a very soft spot.

Along with optional English subtitles, there is a very good 19-minute promotional featurette with lots of behind-the-scenes footage and interviews with the cast and the crew, and a decent 25-minute overview of the film’s production history and intentions.

Eschewing his usual recitation of the careers of the filmmakers, Hong Kong movie expert Frank Djeng joins Asian film enthusiast F.J. DeSanto to focus their talk on a deconstruction of the film’s narrative and themes. Djeng explains that he didn’t appreciate the film the first time he saw it, but has become obsessed with it as time has gone by. As they point out the film’s dynamics—DeSanto suggests that the film has such a distinctive three-act structure that it

could easily be presented as three episodes in a limited TV series—and explain the plot, they also reflect on the meanings of the decisions the characters make. “This is actually a very deep film. It’s almost like, watching the entirety, almost like a spiritual journey. You’re going through this journey together with the two characters. First, you’re moved by the relationship, then you’re shocked by what happened. You’re enraged, just like Andy Lau is enraged, but then gradually, in the final part, it became like this healing process where you saw how Andy Lau’s character makes the decision to turn things around, to turn the rage around. That’s how you, as an audience, also felt relief at the end, because he has shown you the way. In the end, you as an audience are enlightened by his choice.”

Perhaps feeling guilty or just wanting to make sure that his own karma is on an even keel, Djeng then goes back and supplies a second commentary by himself, where he does indeed fill in a few more details about the production (Cheung and Lau did not get along so well) but also spends most of his time reiterating his explanation of the plot from new perspectives, so that between the two talks, a viewer will have a pretty good idea of the thematic and spiritual nuances the film is exploring.

The horror of adolescence

Adolescence is a horror film in and of itself. The body is changing. Sex rears its frightening head. The mind is trying to sort out what is real and what is not, what is important and what is irrelevant, who are true friends and who are exploiters, and even what parts of the personality are genuine and what are trial runs and experiments. The characters in the 1998 Japanese horror film directed by Ataru Oikawa, *Tomic*, are in their very early twenties, but parts of the film are about events earlier in their lives and adolescence really isn’t over anyway until the mid-twenties or so. Besides, the film isn’t designed for the characters, it is designed for its audience, which are younger viewers anticipating where their adolescence is leading and having their worst fears realized with such features.

Released on Blu-ray by Arrow Video (UPC#760137164340, \$40), the film requires patience because it isn’t until about halfway through that its various narrative fragments begin to form a comprehensive image. Reminiscent in some ways of a David Lynch feature, its purpose is the evocation of feelings and fears, and there is only just enough of a story to nudge you through its horrors. Briefly, the primary narrative fragments concern a photography student who is seeing a hypnotherapist in an attempt to recall the events leading up to an ‘accident’ she otherwise has no memory of, which had occurred while she was in high school. There is also a police detective, who seems in every way like a high school nerd, investigating a series of reported deaths that have apparently involved the same unfound corpse, again and again, stretching back decades. And having just moved in two floors below the student, a mentally troubled young man is carrying something in a bag that talks, and he is feeding it, and he is growing it. There are connections between the characters, all of which involve the mysterious title character, and rather than having a sudden revelation as to how everything fits together, as might occur in an American film, it just seems that gradually more and more of the initially disparate scenes and characters begin to link to one another. Considering how most of the movie goes down, the ending is surprisingly resolute, even though it still holds onto its ambiguities for dear life.

Mami Nakamura, Yoriko Doguchi, Tomorō Taguchi and Miho Kanno star. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1. While the cinematography is grainy at times, for the most part the image is smooth and colors are sharp. The 5.1-channel DTS sound is suitably eerie and dimensional, and well worth amplifying. The film is in Japanese with optional English subtitles. Along with five trailers for the film and its sequels (demonstrating the pathways the story will take, albeit with different casts) and a small collection of memorabilia in still frame, there is a taxing 35-minute interview with Oikawa who talks about his career, making the film and working with the cast in a monotone voice while barely moving a muscle, leaving you wondering how he managed to accomplish anything at all; a nice 16-minute interview with Nakamura talking about her character and working with the filmmakers; a good 13-minute interview with producer Mikihiro Hirata, talking about his relationship with Oikawa and how he set about putting the production together; and a great 28-minute production featurette that includes a nice interview with manga author Junji Ito (“When I was young, I was scared of women.”).

The Japanese film enthusiast known as Amber T. supplies a passable commentary track. She talks quite a bit about the manga books that the film is drawn from and works her way through the narrative, commenting on the characters and what they represent, but she also addresses how the film is executed and points out its various strengths. “I love this bit of blink-and-you’ll-miss-it gore here. This period of Japanese horror does tend to be somewhat lighter on gore than previous offerings, but that just means that when you do get gore, especially great practical effects like we see in this movie, the gore is almost more impactful.”

The horror of war

A worthy and even classy spinoff of the brief but potent Nazi zombie genre, Kongkiat Komesiri’s 2024 *Operation Undead*, released on Blu-ray by Well Go USA Entertainment (UPC#810348037831, \$30), is set in 1941 when Japan invaded Thailand. After a few days of resistance, the Thai government capitulated, but in the film, the Japanese brought a secret bio-weapon with them, a walking corpse that infects others by biting them and turns them into walking

corpses as well if they are not entirely devoured. The Japanese had hoped to experiment with the corpses as a substitute for soldiers, and when one gets loose, Thai soldiers are ordered to cooperate with the Japanese to capture or eradicate them. These zombies, however, if they aren’t too mangled, retains their intelligence, an ability to communicate and even emotions, and so what the Japanese end up with after a few initial confrontations is a lot of very irritated and unstoppable dead Thai soldiers looking for revenge. The action and the gore are marvelous, and the film conveys a genuine metaphor about the nature of war through its exaggerations. Komesiri incorporates interesting allusions to Thai art, from shadow plays to statues, and creates valid emotional connections between the heroes—a scene at the beginning where a soldier proposes to his girlfriend is truly charming—that can then become hellishly twisted once the mayhem begins. Running 111 minutes, the film uses the caves and jungles of Thailand as a fresh setting, and is while its progress is ultimately inevitable (including a post-credit epilog) it will certainly satisfy the interests and appetites of genre fans.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The color transfer is solid and sharp. Much of the film is set in a greenish darkness, but when the sun comes out, it is clear that the hues are accurate. The 5.1-channel DTS sound has a pleasing dimensionality and the musical score, attributed to an outfit called Giantwave, is effectively unnerving during the suspense scenes, although the primary theme veers way too closely to *Oh! Susanna* for comfort, especially when accompanied by vocals over the end credits. The film is in Thai and Japanese, with optional English subtitles, and comes with a trailer.

Being excellent

Sammo Hung’s 1981 Golden Harvest production, *The Prodigal Son*, is available on Blu-ray from Arrow Video (UPC#760137132271, \$40). The first half of the film is especially impressive, not just for the acrobatic fights, but for the dramatic staging and witty narrative (some of the humor is broad, but not unduly so). The film earns enough good will from the first half, even after almost everybody is slaughtered, that when it transitions in its second half to a more template-like hero-training-in-the-sticks setting and then concludes after 105 minutes with a number of plot points still dangling, the experience as a whole is still entirely satisfying. Biao Yuen is a spoiled kid who believes he is the best kung fu fighter in town because his wealthy father pays everybody to let him win. When a traveling opera company comes through for a visit, however, they can’t be paid off and he learns the truth. Humbled, he leaves home, joins the company and tries to ingratiate himself with the star, played by Ching Ying Lam, who is a genuine fighting master, only succeeding when the minions of another, similarly spoiled fighter massacre the company to prevent their master from learning the truth. The prodigious Hung also appears in the final third of the film, as another kung fu expert who helps to train the hero. You can tell he put a lot of thought into every scene—sometimes, new directors will do that, and then get, well, not lazier, but less stressed over the small stuff in their later films; the film took several months to shoot—and the reward is a consistently inventive and engaging narrative with invigorating fight scenes and clever stagings.

Two versions are presented, a *Theatrical* version and a *Home Video* version. Both have the same running time and the only difference is that the cast members are identified with credit titles when they first appear in the movie—i.e., Hung’s doesn’t show up until the final act—on the *Theatrical* version, while the *Home Video* version just lists them normally in the end credits. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and the color transfer is consistently solid and accurate. The image is essentially free of flaws. The monophonic sound is reasonably strong. The film defaults to Cantonese and also has an alternate Mandarin track and an English track, with optional English subtitles. There is a 2-minute presentation of the film’s opening and closing credits in English; three trailers; a passable collection of memorabilia in still frame; a good 27-minute interview with Hung, Yuen and co-star Frankie Chan talking mostly about the fighting scenes in the film, and by extension, the performances; a good 27-minute piece with fighting consultant Guy Lai that includes demonstrations of the moves used in the film, as he talks about the ‘Wing Chun’ fighting style (“Wing Chun is a girl’s martial art. When a boy does it, how does one show the softness within the hardness and still retain the beauty of it all?”) and also reminisces about shooting the film; and an entertaining 30-minute visit to a Wing Chun training facility near Times Square that goes over the background of the facility’s operator (he was a fan of Bruce Lee as a child and never lost his passion) and a breakdown of the basic moves in the practice.

One commentary track features Hong Kong film expert Frank Djeng and an actor who worked a lot in Hong Kong, Frank Samuels. They talk extensively about the film at hand, explaining the cultural references (although the staging of the opera scenes reflect traditional Mandarin opera, the songs are Cantonese), dissecting the fight scenes, talking about that phase of Hung career and going over the impressive work of each major performer. They also respond to the film as a whole, speaking about its shifts in tone and how innovative Hung was being with various sequences.

Normally it is best to listen to Djeng’s commentaries first, before moving to the usual second commentary featuring Hong Kong film mavens Arne Venema and Mike Leeder, who always have interesting things to say, but tend to digress more and be less organized than Djeng’s talks are. On *Prodigal Son*, however, we strongly recommend listening to their talk first and then advancing to Djeng and Samuels. In this case, Venema and Leeder have clearer, more introductory things to say about the film and the performers, perhaps because

Samuels pushed Djeng to a higher level of analysis and obligated him to forgo his usual overview of the film's intentions and what the artists are best known for. Venema and Leeder dive into those topics clearly, identifying each performer, discussing the plot, and speaking in practical terms about the fading popularity of Chinese opera at the time. They also talk more clearly about the different fighting practices on view, and how Hung modified or adapted them to the film, which is in part about the rise of the Wing Chun style. The best segment of all in their talk, however, really deserves to be a separate supplement of its own, and could apply to any martial arts feature appearing in the Seventies and beyond, as they talk about the actual, original Chinese meaning of the phrase, 'kung fu,' which is, 'being excellent.' As they point out, the phrase could be applied to any endeavor, from making noodles to composing poetry. We wish we could transcribe the entire conversation, but it would take up way too much room, so we can only leave you with this sample: "In **Matrix**, when Keanu Reeves goes, 'I know kung fu.'..." "That would be a good Bill & Ted tie-in. 'I know how to be excellent to each other.'" "Actually, I think Bill & Ted were more kung fu than **The Matrix** was."

Prodigal Son was ostensibly a prequel to Hung's earlier 1978 **Warriors Two**, another Arrow Blu-ray (UPC#760137125297, \$40), although the links are tenuous and mostly academic, except for the emphasis upon learning and practicing Wing Chun. Ka-Yan Leung plays the matured character embodied by Yuen in **Prodigal Son**. Ho Wang is the hero, a bank cashier who overhears a plot to kill the town's mayor, and is injured while trying to prevent it. Hung has another role (he could, vaguely, be the offspring of the character he plays in **Prodigal Son**) as the training partner of Wang's character, after Wang's character is nursed back to health by Leung's character, who also becomes his teacher. Like **Prodigal Son**, some of the personality humor is rather broad for non-Chinese viewers, but the sequences are brief and do not interrupt the flow of the story. The film's narrative template has a more standard construction—the initial confrontations, the training, tragedy and the final confrontations—but the fight choreography, which Hung also oversaw along with directing and acting, is magnificent. Watching the characters fight is like watching ballet, but with red paint getting splattered all over the place. The film is wholly satisfying simply because there is enough plot to string everything together and thereafter, the fights are systematically transfixing.

Two versions of the film are presented, the 96-minute *Hong Kong Theatrical Cut* and an *International Export Cut* that runs just 90 minutes, dropping some of Hung's clowning. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The color transfer looks terrific, and is free of significant flaws. The default soundtrack is in Cantonese. It is monophonic and reasonably strong. There is also a Mandarin track and a standard English track, but additionally, there is an English track in 5.1-channel Dolby Digital, constructed originally for a home video release. The separations are great fun and the dimensionality is so enlivening that it makes a worthy alternative to the Cantonese track. There are optional English subtitles; two trailers; an extensive selection of memorabilia in still frame, including a great selection of lobby cards; a good 46-minute overview of the film including clips from the interviews with Hung and Lai that appeared on **Prodigal Son**, but providing a good introduction to the film's production history and value; and a nice 5-minute interview with Leung ("Basically, I love movies.").

The *Hong Kong Cut* has a commentary from Djeng and Samuels. They do spend some time talking about Samuels's career and about Hung in general, but they also address the film at key moments, talking about the other players, while during the extensive final fights, they begin analyzing the choreography and performances on a more detailed level. Djeng also supplies his always reliable insights on the Chinese idioms and cultural minutiae used in the film. Venema and Leeder provide a commentary for the *International Cut*, again supplying a little more direct information about the narrative, the cast and the film's production history, although their talk also has plenty of digressions about the various cast members and about Hung's career. They point out that on well run Hong Kong sets, such as Hung's, everyone becomes familiar with all of the jobs, not just their own. "Even if you talk to Sammo's stunt team, Sammo will go, 'Okay, today you're going to go build props.' 'Why?' 'Because you're a stuntman. You need to know how to go through a table. What it's made of. How to make it. Oh, what if you get hurt, you can't be a stuntman any more. At least you know how to build props. You know how to do this, you know that.' So most of Sammo's stunt team, they all became action directors because Sammo would make sure they were well versed."

Martial arts soccer

A young farm boy picks up wild eggs with his toes and flips them into his pockets, and then spends hours at a grinding mill that is operated by his feet and legs. When he has to relocate to the city, he discovers that he has a natural talent for soccer in the 1983 Golden Harvest production, **The Champions**, a Celestial Pictures Eureka! Blu-ray (UPC#760137162605, \$40). Although some of the fights and soccer shenanigans get a bit bloody, the film is a cheery comedy, mixing slapstick of all sorts with exceptional and impressive footwork and ball control that is frantically edited to keep the 91-minute film moving down the field at a rapid pace. Biao Yuen stars, with Kwok-keung Cheung as his buddy, the two joining forces on one squad to take down a star player and his corrupt owner on an opposing team. Naturally, some of the slapstick is a bit juvenile, but the film's setting and stunts are not just fresh, they are different from almost anything else. There is also an enjoyable martial arts tango scene.

Directed by Brandy Yuen, the film ends before it wears out its creative spirit (or just as that spirit is about to expire) and is continually fun, energetic and inventive.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The color transfer looks sharp and hues are bright. The monophonic sound is fairly strong. The film is in Cantonese with optional English subtitles. An alternate English language track is also available, as is a Japanese track, but only the Japanese track has a catchy theme song that is sung in English—the English track retains the slightly less catchy Chinese theme song. Also featured are two trailers, a cute 19-minute conceptualization of the best Hong Kong movie star soccer team, and a decent 15-minute overview of the film and the filmmakers from an historical context.

There are also two commentary tracks. One features Hong Kong film experts F.J. DeSanto and Frank Djeng. Djeng begins by speaking disparagingly about the word, 'soccer,' but the pair supply an excellent track, going over the backgrounds of the cast and crew, pointing out the locations where the film was shot, getting into the details of the soccer skills and soccer minutiae, and appreciating the film's artistry. "There's some goofy stuff in this, but it never goes too far. What I like about this movie is it's very tonally consistent. It establishes a tone and never sort of deviates from it, and also never sort of deviates from the story that it's building."

Hong Kong film enthusiasts Mike Leeder and Arne Venema dive fairly rapidly into even more digressions about soccer on the second track, sharing all sorts great and fascinating stories about Asian soccer tournaments (once, two teams were both deliberately trying to lose a championship game) and slipping now and then back into talking about the stars, the story and the filmmaking. Overall, however, it is quite an entertaining talk because the two are clearly enthused about the topic.

"Tell me about the dirtiest football game ever."

"Well, the dirtiest international football game ever played in Asia was on February 20th, 2008, when China played Japan. Now, what happened was, the game kind of started out normal, but after Japan scored one-zero, the Chinese players were not very happy about that, the Mainland Chinese players, and you had everything from rugby tackles, two-footed tackles from behind, punching in the head. Like, it was the most insane game ever. It is suggested that the referee may have been bought, because at one point, the Chinese goalie kicks, fly kicks the Japanese forward in the chest and the ref is like, 'I didn't see anything.' It's just absolutely mental."

Live action cartoons

Comedy does not always translate well from one culture to another, and a case in point is the propensity in Chinese films to use facial deformities as a source of humor. It happens often enough in Sammo Hung's films, but it is even more prevalent in the Fortune Star Eureka! two-platter *Eureka Classics* double bill Blu-ray release, **Two Taoist Tales** (UPC#760137162612, \$50). The films, produced by Lo Wei Motion Picture Co., Ltd., are wild and clownish, and while the combat scenes are breathlessly inventive and fantastical, the humor can sometimes leave something to be desired. Characters have buckteeth, sores on their faces, and other exaggerated flaws. We won't even go into the hair. And do the Chinese genuinely think that small dots on a person's nose are funny? Both films feature fight choreography designed by the Yuen Brothers, Cheung-yan Yuen, Yat-chor Yuen and Shun-yi Yuen. There is wirework involved, but what is impressive is the imaginative and witty nature of the clashes, which are as clever as they are athletic. Both films are letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1, and both basically have very good color transfers. There are clearly no flaws in the transfers themselves, although the cinematography can leave something to be desired at times. The monophonic sound is reasonably strong. Both films are in Cantonese with optional English subtitles, and both have alternate English language tracks.

The 1984 *Taoism Drunkard* is so fast paced and the dialog is so frantic, in fact, that we opted for the English language track, although it was helpful to run the subtitles anyway, since the translations are different enough between the two that it can help the viewer figure out what the heck is going on. Cheung-yan directed and also stars as the title character (and as a secondary female character), constantly swigging a gourd of alcohol as he sets about his mission to bring a male virgin, played by Yat-chor, back to his temple to complete a ceremony after he accidentally damages the temple's defenses. The villain, played by Shun-yi, wants to grab some sacred scrolls at the temple to obtain more powers, although he is already substantially gifted when it comes to flying through the air and tossing around a deadly cannonball that he seems to carry in his back pocket. The three actors are well practiced in working with one another, and their timing is exquisite in the dizzying fight scenes, an adeptness that extends to the other members of the cast, as well. The leaps and mid-air swirls are dazzling, never giving the viewer time to think about the physics of flight, as blows are traded with the speed of a blender on its maximum setting. There is also an elaborate spherical robot guarding an altar (and designed to munch an attacker's private parts—the film is loaded with off-color humor) that is comically stupid looking, although the gimmicks coming out of it are crazy. Amid the many fights, the gags about drinking, about bodily functions and about girls chasing boys and vice-versa are so rudimentary that the slapstick stunts cannot rescue their endless redundancies. Running 95 minutes, parts of the film are impressive, yes, but it is best to know what you are getting into ahead of time and to place your expectations on their minimal setting.

The accurate colors only make the facial makeup all the more appalling. When the camera is in focus the picture is very sharp, but there are brief singular cuts to shots that are badly out of focus. Along with a trailer, there is a very good 18-minute introduction to the film, which suggests that the 'Yuen Clan' choreography goes beyond the fights to inform the film's slapstick and every aspect of the character interaction.

There are also two commentary tracks, which is advantageous because the film does become more amusing on multiple viewings. Hong Kong film expert Frank Djeng provides one track, talking about the players, admiring the choreography, sneaking in a quick history of Taoism and explaining the various cultural references, while also translating the various idiomatic expressions and phrases, including the almost endless double entendres. The second track features Hong Kong film enthusiasts Arne Venema and Mike Leeder, who also share stories about the cast, giggle over the off-color gags, talk about life in Hong Kong (if you want to find a decent apartment, just go to a rental agent and ask for a list of places where murders have been committed—no one wants to rent those) and enthusiastically comment upon the fight scenes, which they characterize as, "Live action cartoons." They also point out that the film can be more fun in a crowded theater. "When you see a movie like this with an audience, who may also have had, shall we say, some chemical adjustments, it's awesome."

Neither the humor, the narrative nor even the fights are as elaborate on the 1986 *The Young Taoism Fighter*, directed by Chi-hwa Chen, but it is a more entertaining film. The story plays out quite clearly in Cantonese. Yat-chor is the hero again, an undisciplined temple disciple who sneaks around and uncovers old, dusty manuals that explain how to perform nearly magical fighting moves. It is a good thing that he does, because a villain is busily building up his own deadly skill set. Running 100 minutes, the comedy is still fairly lowbrow, but it is not aggressively base, and there are some witty bits involving real turtles that talk and other inspired gags. While both movies have a romantic component, it is more believable here. Hilda Liu co-stars, the two teaming up to take on the villain. While not as grandly staged as the fights in the first film, the engagements are always witty and imaginative.

Some shots are deliberately hazy, but the effect is overdone. Otherwise, the image is sharp. Again, there is a trailer and another good 11-minute introduction to the film.

Djeng provides another commentary track, and while there are gaps in the second half, he does a very good job not only providing the basics about the film, but deconstructing the fight scenes and Chen's overall approach to the film's comedy and action. "The film's style of humor, the pacing and the use of mostly Taiwanese actors really gives this film a more Taiwanese style, with the slower pace, with the scenes being longer, not as hectic or brisk, and the editing is not as hectic, not as fast as the previous film which is more or less a Hong Kong production."

Leeder and Venema have a great time watching the film and also go over the backgrounds of the cast members, the film's release history, their take on the differences between Taiwanese and Hong Kong features, and the reasons behind specific moments in the film.

"When you're using zoom lenses, sometimes when you change the zoom, there's a pressure inside the lens which causes some sort of interesting refraction to take place, and then the lens blows out [the bright light overwhelms the objects surrounding it] and everything, so that's kind of what's going on. There's a lot of like blowout in the sky and everything else."

"That would be artistic. That was a choice."

Clair de loony

Better than a wolfman movie, Kazuhiko Yamaguchi's 1975 Toei production, *Wolf Guy*, released on a combination DVD & Blu-ray by Arrow Video (UPC#760137985785, \$40), begins as the story of a reporter who witnesses several murders of the members of a rock group, being committed by an invisible tiger—in front of his eyes, the flesh of the victims break open and blood gushes everywhere—and manages to track the source to the psychokinetic animosity of a former pop singer who was raped and humiliated by the band. She's become a heroin addict, but government forces want to harness her powers, so the reporter tries to protect her. We don't want to give away the whole plot of the wild 86-minute film, but the reporter, played by Sonny Chiba (who kind of comes across like William Shatner, but with better fighting skills), has special powers of his own, only for just one day a month, although he can also kick butt the normal way on the other days if he has a mind to. The plot is actually rather easy to follow, but with all of the wild turns it takes, along with all of the gore, all of the action and all of the nudity, and the wonderful production designs and funky electronic score (which, at one point, has an awesome guitar solo), it is pretty much irresistible.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. We were unable to review the DVD, but the Blu-ray has fresh colors and is free of wear. The image is often a little soft, but not at a level that interferes with the entertainment. The same is true of the monophonic sound, which is a bit scratchy at times, but workable. Several of the guitar solos on the track are worth amplifying (and yes, there is a nice orchestration of *Clair de Lune* in the background of a restaurant scene). The film is in Japanese with optional English subtitles and comes with a trailer; a nice 10-minute interview with Yamaguchi talking about the story and the cast, although he admittedly doesn't remember much about the film; 17-minute interview with producer Toru Yoshida, who allows as to how he probably should have worked harder to make a better movie

than he did, and shares interesting stories about the people he worked with (he doesn't remember all that much about the film, either); and a cool 14-minute interview with Chiba who never mentions the film, talking about his profession and how he teaches students to be movie actors, explaining that they have to learn how to express themselves with their bodies, and leave their faces until the very end ("It's your trump card.").

The old hometown looks the same

Nagisa Oshima's darkly funny satire, *Death by Hanging*, released on Blu-ray by The Criterion Collection (UPC#715515167819, \$40), begins as a serious documentary about capital punishment and then descends—if that is the word—into fantasy. Identifying a small building adjacent to a prison as the execution chamber, the 1968 film enters it and delineates the process by which a condemned prisoner has his sentence carried out under the observation of nearly a dozen guards, witnesses and officials. What follows, however, is essentially another variation on *Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*, although instead of showing the prisoner breaking free, it just shows—for a while, logically, and then gradually with greater and greater absurdity—what happens when the hanging doesn't work. The prisoner is, for a while, in a catatonic state, followed by a state of amnesia. The priest argues that his soul has indeed been removed and so no further execution is required, while other officials demand that the hanging be done again, or that the prisoner acknowledge who he is and what he has done. Eventually, in an attempt to rekindle his memory, the officials begin to enact his life and his crimes in front of him as he stares on, unresponsively perplexed. The enactments are simple at first, but as they fail, or garner hints of acknowledgement, they become more and more elaborate. At about the halfway point of the 118-minute feature, the décor of the execution room changes—the walls are suddenly papered with newspapers, and other items are revealed. Later, the group, including the prisoner, even take a field trip to the scene of the crime and re-enact a rape and murder upon a victim who happens to be there.

The personalities of the various officials emerge over the course of the drama as they take turns, reluctantly or enthusiastically, playing the accused, members of his family, and the victim. Some of the men, of course, served in World War II and may well have committed similar atrocities under the sanction of wartime. The convicted man is Japanese but had Korean parents, and so in addition to presenting arguments about the justification of government (i.e., society) sponsored execution, there are also contemplations about the roles that racial isolation and poverty play in crime—is it a valid factor, or is it simply an association that the majority, and even the filmmakers, impose upon the perception of statistics? This is reinforced when the viewer gradually becomes privy to the emerging thoughts of the convicted man, and one of his soliloquies gets to the heart of how psychopathic behavior can emerge. "I'd been living in my imagination since I was little. I wanted to ask for sweets and nice clothes but you can't ask for such things. When you're old enough to understand, you learn to give up. But in your mind you never give up. In your imagination you can eat sweets, wear nice clothes and be happy. So when I was old enough to feel sexual desire, it seemed completely natural simply to imagine its fulfillment. I would follow girls. I would steal. But those things would spur my imagination, make it swell. As I commit those crimes again and again in my mind, I begin to feel something like confidence."

The black-and-white picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The image is sharp and spotless, adding significantly to a viewer's concentration upon the emotional dynamics of the individual characters. The monophonic sound is solid. The film is in Japanese with optional English subtitles and comes with a trailer, an excellent 30-minute rumination upon the film and Oshima's career by Tony Rayns and a compelling 25-minute black-and-white documentary Oshima made in 1965, *Diary of Yumbogi* (Rayns also discusses the short in his talk), a combination of photos and detailed narration addressing extreme poverty in Korea in the aftermath of war in the Fifties and specifically its effect upon children.

If you can make it there you'll make it anywhere

Kind of a kickboxing movie, the 1983 Shaw Bros. production, *Hong Kong Hong Kong*, a Celestial Pictures 88 Films Blu-ray (UPC#760137167693, \$30), opens in the slums of Hong Kong where an impossibly cute immigrant from mainland China, played by Cherie Chung, agrees to marry an elderly carpenter. He wants a son and she wants a legal ID card so that she won't have to go back. She also meets the kickboxer, however, played by Alex Man, and since the two are closer in age to one another, they fall in love. The film is nothing like the glossy Shaw Bros. movies of the Seventies and before, concentrating instead on selling the poverty of the characters' surroundings to place the viewer in their world and their desperation. Running 97 minutes, the film, directed by Clifford Choi, does not have a cheerful conclusion, but the coupling of Chung and Man is sexy even amid the filth, and the kickboxing sequences are brutal, so viewers who are prepared to slum it for a while will get what they are looking for.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The colors are fresh and when there is enough light, Chung is delectable, but the emphasis of the cinematography is on the grit, grime and gruesome realities of social inequity. The monophonic sound is reasonably strong and the film is in Cantonese with optional English subtitles. Along with a trailer and a 3-minute montage of promotional photos, there is a great 18-minute interview with Man talking about his career and his approach to his performance.

Hong Kong film expert David West supplies a passable commentary

track, focusing mostly on the careers of the cast and the crew, but also touches on the nature of boxing and gambling in Hong Kong at the time, and more importantly, he examines Hong Kong politics in the day, making note that a clearly exhibited license plate in one shot has the numbers, '1997,' the year when Hong Kong would be handed back over to the Chinese. He talks about the film's New Wavey tone, as well, explaining that it looks nothing like any other Shaw Bros. film ever. "We have an action style in this picture that's very sort of unromanticized. It lacks the sort of flair and exaggeration of most Hong Kong fight scenes. Nobody's striking awesome 'kung fu' poses, nobody's busting out their 'evil claw,' and no one's flying through the air like in a wuxia picture. Instead, it's people fighting full contact, and it's messy and scrappy and they get bruised and battered."

Marital discord

A challenging but rewarding 1990 Japanese film about a marriage undergoing difficulties, **The Sting of Death**, has been released on Blu-ray by Radiance Films (UPC#760137142782, \$40). Since the movie is also a period piece, set in the mid-Fifties, it could be seen as a metaphor of the political reconciliation after the War, but it can just as easily be taken at face value. The wife, played by Keiko Matsuzaka, cannot get over her husband, played by Ittoku Kishibe, having had an affair with another woman. The husband is remorseful and contrite, promising that he has broken off with his lover—which he has—and the couple have two small children they must care for. Still, the wife perpetually goes through intense mood swings, despising her husband one moment and loving him the next, and after several months, it begins to take its toll. The film is the ultimate in dry humor. The actors play everything straight, but some of their actions are completely absurd. Additionally, the director, Kôhei Oguri, never moves the camera, ever. There are many different setups and angles (close-ups are rare), but there is nevertheless something stupefying about how the image is always locked into its progression of stationary views, which enhances the film's emotional dryness all the more, even when the characters rage at one another (which is why it can seem comedic). Running 114 minutes, the film will feel off-putting at first, but as the characters become more familiar and the film's parameters become clearer, its subversive portrait of family values and domesticity will seem both unique and captivating.

The picture is presented with an aspect ratio of about 1.66:1. Befitting the Fifties, the colors are drab, and the presentation is not aided by the constant presence of very minor but discernible speckling. Nevertheless, as the film advances, the set designs and landscapes become more compelling, particularly as you begin to recognize the palette the filmmakers are working with. The monophonic sound is clean and distinctive. At one point, Kishibe's character uses a bamboo pole to drag a swimming pool (at an asylum) when he fears his wife has drowned herself, and you can hear the air bubbling up the hollow center of the pole. The musical score, by Toshio Hosokawa, is also appealingly abstract and spare. The film is in Japanese with optional English subtitles, and comes with a very good 20-minute analysis of the film ("The camera doesn't move, but that doesn't mean it's a static shot. Let's say you look at someone who is not moving for 10 seconds. That's completely different from looking at a photo for 10 seconds. If you look at a single photo for 10 seconds, those 10 seconds don't matter, because that time belongs to the viewer. You could choose to do something entirely different with your time. But if a fixed shot in a film plays for 10 seconds, those 10 seconds belong to the film. Even if it is a fixed shot, it reflects time, so it's not static."). Also featured is a nice 56-minute French documentary about Japanese filmmaking in the Nineties that has lots of terrific clips and a good piece on anime at its end, but just a brief (and pessimistic) statement from Oguri.

Wives and lovers

At one point in the 88 Films Blu-ray release, **Yakuza Wives** (UPC#76013716924, \$40), a gangster played by Riki Takeuchi indicates he is going to kill himself in front of his compatriots, and then jabs a knife into the right side of his belly. Flinching in pain, he declares, "This is stupid," and viewers will undoubtedly concur. A Toei production directed by Hideo Gosha, we do not recall ever seeing a movie that had so much potential and was so bad at the same time. The performances are excellent, the cinematography is superb, and many individual scenes are impressive. Those scenes, however, never link together effectively. Running 118 minutes, the 1986 film plays like a 2-hour trailer for a TV series or something. The narrative leaps forward again and again, so that every promising scene, every interesting scene and every memorable scene is left dangling as the narrative shifts to something else and something else again.

Shima Iwashita stars as the leader of a yakuza gang while her husband is in prison serving time. Other gangs are restless and want a bigger share of the pie, so she has to be tougher and smarter than the other bosses to stay on top. Those scenes are terrific. She tries to nudge her sister, played by Rino Katase, into an arranged marriage outside of the crime families, and while the sister resists, she agrees to go through with it if she can take a little vacation beforehand. Apparently by coincidence, because there is no explanation offered (admittedly, story logic is often not a strong Japanese cultural touchstone), a mobster from a rival gang who is at the same island resort hiring a hitman to assassinate one of the underlings of Iwashita's character meets Katase's character, rapes her, and the two fall in love. It gets even more convoluted from there. Once in a while the film is truly amazing. There is a wonderful scene where the two sisters have a knock-down-drag-out fight in a room, screaming at

one another the whole time. Outside a door, a group of henchmen can clearly hear what is going on, but they are cowering, scared to death of the women and what could happen if the door were to open. But ultimately, the film is just as dumb as the character who gave himself the appendectomy suggests.

The film does not begin where it left off if playback is terminated. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. Colors are accurate and gorgeous, and the image is reasonably sharp so the hues are meticulously defined. There are a few stray markings and a mild grain here and there, but for the most part, the quality of the presentation adds to the film's appeal. The monophonic sound is solid and there is a nice jazz musical score. There are optional English subtitles, two trailers, a 4-minute montage of promotional photos, a meandering 16-minute introduction to the film, and an interesting 25-minute interview with tattoo artist Seiji Mouri, talking about his career as a stage actor, how he got into the tattoo business (playing henchmen himself, he realized there was a need for such artists because of the yakuza movie boom) and the challenge of painting tattoos on dozens of extras at a time.

Lam action

An erratic action film set in Cambodia, Hong Kong and the United States, Ringo Lam's 1995 **The Adventurers** has a handful of exciting gunfight sequences, including an impressively staged finale in which the hero, played by Andy Lau, grabs a helicopter to chase after the man he wants to kill. The narrative, however, lacks the logic to support most of the action and the film, which runs 110 minutes, feels like little more than an excuse to stage its fights and explosions. Released on Blu-ray by Fortune Star and Eureka! (UPC# 760137177883, \$40), Lau is an orphaned Cambodian who wants to kill the Hong Kong bigwig responsible for the death of his parents and sister when he was a child. After failing to assassinate him in a crowded restaurant, he arranges with the CIA to become the head of a San Francisco crime syndicate so that he can seduce the guy's daughter and become his son-in-law. The individual transitions from scene to scene—he also seduces the bigwig's mistress, who later gets into a fight with the daughter over him—are just as ludicrous, and make the emotional changes the characters go through hard to believe. Fans will certainly enjoy all of the activity Lam musters up for the film, but others will be less forgiving.

Rosamund Kwan, Jacklyn Wu, Paul Chun and David Chiang costar. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The image is grainy from time to time, but that comes from the cinematography's 'realistic' style and otherwise the picture is fresh and sharp, with accurate fleshtones. There is a 5.1-channel DTS audio track that brings a modest dimensionality to the showiest sequences (and to Lau's memorable end credit song), and there are optional English subtitles. Also featured along with a trailer is a decent 21-minute overview of Lam, Lau and Hong Kong's 'Last Golden Age' in the late Eighties and early Nineties (many directors, including Lam, subsequently left for Hollywood) and a 14-minute interview with co-screenwriter Sandy Shaw talking about her career and about the discussions she had with Lam about various scenes (she learned a lot from him—"Since then, I worked really hard to use visuals to tell a story.").

Hong Kong film expert David West provides a commentary track, admitting that the film feels at times like the script was written on the fly and suggesting that was how things work sometimes. He delves deeply into the careers and lives of Lam, Lau and Kwan, and also goes over the backgrounds of the other cast and crew members. While he does spend a certain amount of time describing in detail other films they have worked on and discussing the dynamics of Hong Kong politics in the Nineties, he also pays attention to the details in the film at hand ("When Lau's character says, 'Oh, that's an ugly name,' he's referring to the fact that 'dog' is normally an insult in Cantonese. That's very different to the way we think of dogs in the West. In the West we associate dogs with loyalty and companionship. They are beloved family pets. But in Hong Kong culture, calling somebody a 'dog' is definitely not intended to suggest positive attributes like loyalty and devotion.") and he supplies a cogent thematic analysis of the movie and Lam's work in general. "This is certainly very different from kung fu movies of the 1970s or wuxia films, for example, [in] which violence is merely, or pain, rather, is merely a spur to the hero to drive them on to fight harder and to kill more of their enemies. Violence in this movie is much more realistically handled."

Crazy

A mad and maddening film about madness, Toshio Matsumoto's 1988 **Dogra Magra**, has been released on Blu-ray by Radiance (UPC#760137164616, \$40). Some viewers will be intrigued by its confusions, while others will tear out their hair as they struggle to get through it. Set in the Twenties, most of the film is a conversation between a doctor and a young male patient in a Kyoto asylum, but it also expands to suggest that the patient may have committed a murder, and to examine the patient's relationship with the previous doctor, who has recently passed away. Flashbacks also illustrate the content of some of the conversations. The patient apparently awakens every day not remembering what occurred the day before. The film jumps backwards and forward in time, not just in the same scene, but sometimes in the same shot, and is filled with oddball images and absurdities, but the murder mystery narrative appears to develop significantly as the 109-minute film advances, at least for a while. The final shot clarifies everything well enough, but viewers who are intrigued by epistemological twists and turns will mostly likely wish to watch the movie again or several more times to fill in the references. Other viewers will be so put off by the over-the-top performances—characters shout at one another without nuance at times, and give

wide-eyed grimaces when on homicidal rampages—and so irritated by the elliptical narrative that they may not make it to the end the first time through. It's a challenge, to be sure.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The cinematography is deliberately grainy, but the transfer appears reasonably stable, although there are a handful of stray speckles. Hues are bright and reds are deep. The monophonic sound is fairly strong, and there is a terrific abstract musical score by Haruna Miyake. The film is in Japanese and is accompanied by optional English subtitles along with a trailer; a brief but rewarding collection of design sketches juxtaposed with photos in still frame; a 21-minute interview with Matsumoto about how he came to make the film, why he chose the cast and what his intentions were ("The only truth of human cognition is that we perceive things coherently. It's a kind of Western value system. Is that really the case?"); a 13-minute overview of the film and the works of cinematographer Tatsuo Suzuki (with lots of great clips); and an interesting 16-minute behind-the-scenes performance of *The Ahodara Sutra*, pieces of which open the film (a street performer is demonstrating the sutra recitation for Matsumoto).

Matsumoto provides a commentary track in Japanese with optional English subtitles. He speaks only about the content of the film and its adaptation from Kyusaku Yumeno's novel, explaining why he altered things to accommodate the language of film, and describing what is going on in each scene, something that viewers will certainly welcome. "It's very close to dream logic. So what's unfolding is itself a very dreamlike world. That's the impression that it gives, and the truth is that this could really be interpreted in any way. You could even interpret it to mean that the entire film takes place within a dream."

Dead child

A widow moves to a new town with her young son to get a fresh start in Chang-dong Lee's 142-minute *Secret Sunshine* (*Miryang*), an IFC Films production released on Blu-ray by The Criterion Collection (UPC#71551508-5212, \$40), but 40 minutes into the film, the child is killed horribly (albeit off screen), and the remainder of the film depicts the phases that the mother, played by Do-yeon Jeon, goes through to cope with her grief. The 2007 film addresses with some detail her exploration of Christian evangelicalism as a pathway of relief (although not 'funny haha,' this predates the film's most profound joke), but anger, madness, promiscuity, theft and utter hopelessness are also avenues explored. It is not exactly the kind of movie one watches on a lark, unless one is ready to be taken down with a severe case of the bird flu, but for those who savor the explorations of characters in crisis, or find that motion pictures provide a way to experience the pains of life from a safe distance, it is certainly a memorable experience.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The color transfer is fresh and precise, and the 5.1-channel DTS sound has an effective dimensionality. The film is in Korean with optional English subtitles and comes with a trailer, an excellent 7-minute promotional featurette showing the actors working on their parts, and an equally rewarding 25-minute interview with Lee, who talks at length about the performances and how Korean audiences will pick up on the dialects used by the cast members while others will not.

Iranian classic

A few individual sequences are engrossing, but over all, the 1984 Iranian feature, *The Runner*, a Criterion Collection Blu-ray (UPC#71551529-4119, \$40), is an unremarkable experience. The film, directed by Amir Naderi, represented a breakthrough in Iranian cinema and so it has an academic value in that regard. It is about a parentless child, played by Madjid Niroumand, who lives in a port city, squatting in an abandoned shipwreck and supporting himself with odd jobs, from collecting bottles and selling ice water to shining shoes. As he grows, his ambitions and obsessions guide him, whether he becomes aware that he wants to learn how to read or he just wants to beat his friends in the elaborate races they devise, and it is clear, by the end of the movie, that his path to adulthood, however bumpy, will be successful. It is an inspiring film and checks off all the right boxes for a classic, including some striking cinematography, a young charismatic star (although his character likes to scream at far off modes of transportation, such as boats or planes, which can be disconcerting until you realize it is a thing), and an easy to follow narrative that is conveyed much more through images and sounds than through dialog. What the 91-minute film has trouble with is transitioning from one scene to the next. Clearly autobiographical and clearly a first film, it is cobbled together with various ideas and although everything is coherent at the end, it is fragmented and of limited interest as it proceeds.

The picture is presented in full screen format only. Considering its age and source, the color transfer is outstanding. It is sharp and free of flaws, with steadiness in all lighting situations. The monophonic sound is reasonably clear and solid as well. Although dialog is sparse—you can readily follow the movie without it—the film is in Farsi with optional English subtitles.

A preliminary 49-minute full screen color film made by Naderi, *Waiting* from 1974, has also been included and it is in some ways a warm up for the other feature, although it is more fetishized and has a less developed narrative. This time the boy, played by Rasool Chamani, lives with a couple who are apparently his parents and he is periodically sent to fetch ice water for them, which he obtains in a crystal bowl by knocking on the door of a convent and handing the bowl through the door. There is symbolism in *The Runner*, but it is sophisticated and subdued, while the symbolism in *Waiting* runs as wild as the

horse that gallops down an alleyway on its own near the end. Again, there is almost no dialog in the film, and we found ourselves chuckling at one point contemplating that this was what young men did before there was electronic gaming—sitting in a windowsill in the sun, looking at the colors cast by the crystal bowl and playing with a pigeon until the parents come up with another chore. Naderi provides a 4-minute introduction to the piece, explaining how it evokes different influences that inspired him.

Naderi also sits for a 21-minute interview, talking about how and why he made *The Runner* and discussing its many autobiographical components. There is also an even better 38-minute interview with Naderi and Niroumand (who became a college administrator in California) in front of a live audience, although it is audio only (and part of the talk is responding to snapshots involving the film's production and such). They talk more about the specifics of the shoot (during the time Naderi was making the film, Iraq was invading Iran very close to his locations) and summarize its many accomplishments. Along with a trailer, there is also another somewhat incoherent piece made by Naderi in 2018 running 13 minutes entitled "*Where Do You Stand Today, Amir Naderi?*", which opens with a monolog apparently about efforts to preserve *The Runner*, set to shots of the New York subway system, and then segues to a collage of memorabilia—perhaps some of which was also viewed during the audio-only interview—set to a lovely uncredited jazz score. The film begins where it left off if playback is terminated, but the special features, including *Waiting*, do not.