

Martial arts collection

Ten marvelous Shaw Bros. martial arts features are presented two to a platter in the five-platter Blu-ray set released by Eureka! Entertainment, **Furious Swords And Fantastic Warriors: The Heroic Cinema Of Chang Cheh** (UPC# 760137189527, \$105). All of the films are in period costume and all take place before 1900, except one. In every single film, the color transfer is superb. Fleshtones are vividly detailed, hues are bright and smooth, and the image is free of any noticeable marking or flaw. It is worth noting that the same cannot be said about the cameras Shaw Bros. owned, so once in a while a scene will be grossly out of focus or otherwise distorted, but rest assured that such discrepancies were part of the original production and not a flaw of the Blu-ray. All of the films are letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. All are monophonic, with fairly strong and solid audio tracks, and all are in Mandarin with optional English subtitles. Most have alternate English language tracks, except where noted.

The prolific Chang was one of the core creators of what became the modern martial arts feature, breaking out of the Asian market to entertain the entire world. As one of the commentators on one of the films suggest, he would sometimes have his assistants actually direct the films while he supervised, but as a result he was responsible for dozens of features, sometimes 'directing' as many as eight in a single year. Indeed, one and two-thirds of the films in the collection have a credited co-director. Despite this prolific output, his movies are often highly entertaining, and consistently innovative, both in terms of the martial arts displays and the basic filmmaking language developing the narrative and bridging the story between the fights. While female characters are more prominent and integral to many of his films than some would have you believe, he does have a recognizable 'auteur' stamp of being especially focused on male characters, male bonding and men removing their shirts to perform strenuous tasks. He also has a tendency to show people getting stabbed in the belly.

A dozen good guys face off against a lot more bad guys in the climax of Chang's 1974 *Men from the Monastery*. The film has a steady presentation of fights all the way through, with one hero or another battling different villains while on their various ways to meet up with their compadres. The wonderful Alexander Fu Sheng headlines the cast, which also features Kuan-Tai Chen, Kuan-Chun Chi, Tao Chiang and Ti Lu. The heroes belong to the 'Shaolin Temple,' which (as has been depicted in many other films) is razed by the bad guys, who wish to eliminate the sect and impose a new order. The story can feel confused and fragmented, as if it were abridged from a much longer tale, but from a martial arts perspective it has a clear and direct throughline, with a constant progression of minimally embellished fights. Running 92 minutes, the story just basically moves from fight to fight until the only ones left on both sides meet at the end. It may not be Chang's most profound or indelible work, but it is steadily entertaining, particularly since the large cast ensures that each fight scene will have its own tone and manner.

The transfer looks great, with finely detailed fleshtones and bright hues, but beware, a lot of the final fight is in black and white. It is probably because so much blood starts spilling and it had to be—literally—toned down for audiences.

Asian film expert David West supplies a good commentary track, profiling the cast and the crew, dissecting the narrative (he says that audiences would already be familiar with the characters, which is why so many could be included in the film without confusion), pointing out Chang's specific film strategies ("I think that Chang Cheh liked the contrast between Fu Sheng and Chi Kuan-Chun, because Fu Sheng projects mischievousness and a cheeky charm, whereas Chi is sort of resolute, serious and pretty dour. There is a contrast and appealing dynamic whenever they are on the screen together.") and even going into a lengthy and informative history of the Shaolin Temple. "The Shaolin Monastery was derelict for a long time, but when kung fu movies were popular and everybody started asking, 'Hey, where's the Shaolin Temple we keep hearing about in the movies?,' the Chinese government decided to reopen it. It's fair to say that Shaolin Temple has become a very profitable business in China, where it is a major tourist attraction, and the modern temple was founded in the 1980s thanks to the booming interest in kung fu. You can't understate the role that Chang Cheh and his Shaolin cycle of films helped in that process."

Monastery is well paired with Chang's 1974 *Shaolin Martial Arts*, the two making an ideal double bill, especially since it, too, stars Fu Sheng. Again, the story is essentially about bullies who want to eradicate the martial arts school used by the heroes, but where *Monastery* is essentially an extended (and briskly paced) series of skirmishes leading up to a grand final battle, the more deliberately paced 112-minute *Shaolin* consists of formal demonstrations and confrontations, and follows what is probably the most standard martial arts story template of all. The bad guys bring in some especially tough dudes, and the first set of heroes are killed trying to combat them. The other heroes train harder in a lengthy sequence and go back to try again, but after giving the tough dudes a little more trouble they, too, are killed, sending the final two heroes to train with different masters and learn extra special skills, so they can come back and surprise their opponents. The only unusual shift is that each of the final heroes has a girlfriend, who flirts with him during the training segments, and goes off walking hand-in-hand with him at the end, not that anybody is really fooled by this, since it is a Chang movie and there is plenty of male bonding, as well, not to mention the paucity of shirts. Because of the compositional formality of the fight scenes (which have no wirework), they are better than the fight scenes in *Monastery*, too, but again that is why the two films are perfect together, since

Monastery brings the viewer to one level of terrific martial exchanges, and then *Shaolin* raises it to the next level.

Again, the color transfer is terrific, and again, for a couple of particularly gory, gut-splaining moments in the climax, the image goes monochromatic, although the intrusion does not last as long and works more effectively as an accentuation than it does in *Shaolin*. Nevertheless, we certainly would have preferred that they left it in color. A 3-minute clip of alternate opening and closing credits in English is also included.

Hong Kong film experts Frank Djeng and Michael Worth provide an engaging commentary, talking about the careers and lives of the various stars and the Shaw Bros. production traditions. They also analyze Chang's style of direction and how it contrasted to the directors who built upon what he had established, comment about specific moments in the film and what these moments represent in terms of style, discuss the various fighting styles (and imitative styles) on display, and provide a steady context to the narrative.

Also featured on the platter is an entertaining 16-minute overview of 'Shaolin' movies and their history, with photos from other movies and lots of clips from the films in the set.

The two films on the first platter will please kung fu movie fans, but the opening movie on the second platter, Chang's 1971 *King Eagle*, will please movie fans, period. Centered around a hero, played by Ti Lung, who is not interested in being a hero but gets drawn into the conflict anyway, the film has terrific action scenes—the hero is unbeatable, right off the top, but rather than walk away, the bad guys just can't resist trying to be bad and mess with him—and a wonderful melodrama. Ching Li has a dual role as sisters, one good and one evil, and both are attracted to Lung's character, which frustrates the evil one to no end, since he and the good one fall for each other almost immediately, even though the evil one saw him first and he wanted nothing to do with her. The two women even fight one another, the special effects of which are deftly handled considering the film does not have a Hollywood budget by any means. Lung's character is coming back from a hunt in the woods when he meets a dying messenger who tells him that conspirators murdered the head of a clan group, and identifies one of those conspirators before expiring. In the best hero tradition, Lung's character doesn't care and would be fully content to just walk away and cook the dinner he caught, but the men who wounded the messenger show up and cause a scene, and then go on to murder the hero's friends, and pretty soon he is in the middle of it. Running a brisk but fully satisfying 84 minutes, the fight scenes are terrific, the performances are wonderful, the plot is compelling and the film is glorious escapist entertainment.

The picture even looks more smooth and slick than it does on the first two movies, and the details of Li's makeup are readily discernible in her delicious close-ups. The musical score, from Fu Ling Wang, is also above average, with an interesting Middle Eastern coloring to the love theme. There is no English language track.

Hong Kong film enthusiasts Mike Leeder and Arne Venema provide a typically engaging commentary, identifying the players, the fighters and their histories, sharing stories about the film's production and the Hong Kong movie scene, commenting on specific plot points within the film, and just generally having a rewarding conversation, often finishing each other's sentences, as the film plays in the background:

"Film fighting is a martial art in its own right."

"It's closer to dance."

"Right."

"That's one of the reasons why so many dancers, like Michelle Yeoh, etc...."

"...Make good actors. Well, Van Damme has a dancing background, as well."

In contrast to the universally accessible *King Eagle*, Chang's 1973 *Iron Bodyguard*, co-directed with Hsueh-Li Pao, is very much an acquired taste. Kuan-Tai Chen is the impervious hero, who bonds with a young, handsome court official played by Danny Lee. The young official supports reforms, however, and is soon tossed into jail and scheduled to be executed, so Chen's character makes elaborate arrangements to break him out. They don't go well. Running 99 minutes, the plot leaps ahead from one point to the next, making it difficult to settle down and really enjoy the individual sequences. The fights are narrative driven and not overly showy, although there is plenty of blood. Set mostly in and around an urban area, the film is carefully composed and periodically invigorating, but it often seems to promise more than it actually delivers.

The color transfer is very good, but there are times when the image looks a little too sharp and faintly distorted as a result. Fortunately, the effect, although it occurs regularly, is fleeting.

Djeng and Worth provide another informative commentary track. The film is based upon an actual historical incident in 1898 (which has also been the topic of other movies), and Djeng explains its context and points out which plot points are fact based and which are fanciful. To that end, there is also a thoughtful 15-minute featurette going over the relationship between the film and history, and how the one works to embellish the other.

Speaking of acquired tastes, the third platter in the set is the first of the 'Fantastic Warriors' part of the collection and is substantially different than the initial four features, Chang's 1975 *The Fantastic Magic Baby*. Shot entirely on expressionistic but minimally decorated indoor soundstages, the 65-minute film is an impressive adaptation of a Peking Opera-style folktale, about demons and gods fighting for power. The costumed characters both move and fight as if they

were gymnasts performing floor exercises (there is a very impressive juggling sequence, too). Chang then augments the show's stage components with movie tricks—primarily editing (George Méliès would have felt right at home)—not only to accomplish 'magical' transportations and alterations, but also to sustain the apparent stamina of the characters, who often never slow down. More importantly, the performers do invest their characters with appealing personalities, and the story is easy enough to follow, concluding with an appreciable moral. Supported by traditional Chinese music that is well worth amplifying, it is a shame that there is not an alternate English language track because despite some invigorating bloodletting, it is an excellent cultural entertainment for kids as well as adults. The picture is slick and hues are vivid.

Tacked onto the end of the program—it begins automatically after 'The End'—is 37 minutes of clips from actual Peking Opera productions, still in widescreen and with an image quality that is close to the feature film. If you had decided to ingest psychedelics before putting the movie on, you might not even notice the transition. Although it is not quite a smooth and the stage lighting is more generic, the colors are generally bright and detailed. The clips sort of jumble up whatever narratives are being presented, but you get the idea that they are kind of similar to the movie's story in some ways. The two major differences between the stage production and the movie are that the acrobatics are limited by the necessity of performing them on the stage while remaining in character (though still fabulously impressive), and that a lot of the dialog is sung, whereas none of it is sung in the feature film.

Leeder and Venema supply one commentary track just for the 65-minute film, eagerly talking about the cast, the format and the various adaptations of the folktale (including one that inspired a character in **Dragonball Z**). They also talk about the opera traditions itself, and how it has become a great deal more difficult to train children for 18 hours a day to become proficient at the art's demands, pointing out that Peking Opera has lost a lot of relevance and interest since the advent of feature films, while allowing as to how the format is attempting to stay relevant, describing a new opera, featuring an orange-faced protagonist, about Donald Trump.

Djeng provides a second commentary, for the entire film and addendum, by himself, going into more detail about the movie's narrative and its antecedents, as well as saying more about the cast members and staging. For the addendum he also shares his recollections of attending the operas with his father, points out the differences between the stage work and what Chang created, and reveals the difficulties he had in providing the subtitles because 1) it was difficult to hear what they performers are singing and 2) what they are singing did not match the librettos for the operas depicted.

The build up is a bit elaborate in Chang's 1983 *The Weird Man*, but the 91-minute film essentially settles on a story about a young, evil warlord who wants to consolidate his position and has a young priest executed because he fears the priest's magical powers. Indeed he should, since the priest arranges with his disciples to haunt the villain after he dies, causing lots of mischievous trouble in the court including, at one point, possessing both the villain's wife and his sister in law. The hijinks are amusing, there are plenty of wild fights and the film is reasonably fun. The picture is sharp and not even degraded much during the double exposures. Ricky Cheng and Philip Kwok star.

West returns to provide a commentary, pointing out that the film was the last that Chang made for Shaw Bros. and talking a lot about the later stages of Chang's career, as well as going over how the film represents some of Chang's favorite themes, examining the film's production history and Chang's use of less prominent performers than had appeared in his other films, and delving into the film's transsexual undercurrents.

While the first film on the fourth platter, Chang's 1967 *The Trail of the Broken Blade*, does not have too many fights, the fights that are there are glorious and, more importantly, the story is enormously entertaining, right down to the screwy but workable ending. Jimmy Wang Yu, who has a Damian Lewis thing going, kills the corrupt government official who murdered his father and then must go on the run, growing a goatee so he will not be recognized in the wanted posters. He gets a job in a stable for an inn, and the daughter of the owner of the casino next door falls for him. His heart, however, belongs to his childhood sweetheart, and she misses him so badly that the guy who is in love with her promises to find him and bring him back for her, eventually stopping, of course, at the inn, where he unknowingly becomes best friends with Wang Yu's character. The permutations are wonderful and the cast, which also features Chong Kiu, Ping Chin, and Lisa Chiao Chiao is marvelous. Running 109 minutes, the film has one joyful plot turn after another and never seems to stop coming up with additional excitements—as Kiu and Chin's characters are rushing to help Wang Yu's character fight the main villain, they take a shortcut and end up in a cave full of Indian Jones-style traps.

West supplies another commentary, this time going over the early part of Chang's career and the production and topical film environment that existed when it was made. "The staging of some of these sequences, with the sword demos and the sword dancing, definitely suggests the influence of the musical, and the first film that Chang Cheh directed at Shaw Bros. was an operetta. One of the interesting aspects of *The Trail of the Broken Blade* is how much it sort of sits at the junction between a romance picture and a wuxia picture, because a big part of the plot is the love quadrangle that develops between these characters."

He also goes over the whole history of the rise, fall and rise again of Cantonese films in Hong Kong, explaining that for a while, the market in the city was too small in comparison to the larger Mandarin market that made the films

profitable. He also goes over the careers of the various cast members, talks about the film's narrative and returns several times to Chang's (steadfastly denied) sexual interests and how they manifested in his films. "Chang Cheh is notorious for his enthusiasm for bare-chested muscular torsos in his films, and we see, I think, an early version of that here with the villains who are currently surrounding our hero in these black outfits that are open to their navals. Now if you look at traditional Chinese clothes, or old Chinese paintings, you will never see anybody wearing anything like that, open down to their naval. Right? Chinese culture is much too modest. This is definitely an example of Chang Cheh being anachronistic, I guess is one way to put it."

More lyrical and compositionally dynamic than many of Chang's films, his 1970 *The Wandering Swordsman* is about a thief, played by David Chiang, who steals from other thieves and gives the spoils to those in need. Running 108 minutes, the film and the hero take an unfortunate turn in the later stages of the narrative, robbing the movie of a bit of its joys, but the fight scenes are terrific and the movie generates too much good will overall to be significantly disappointing. Plus, it is very compelling not just visually, but in how the characters move through the frame. Chang even makes use of slow motion to accentuate the hero's spiritual purity.

Leeder and Venema provide the commentary, and while they go over Chang's career again, because of the conversational nature of their talk, they still come up with fresh and interesting details. They also discuss the careers of the other members of the cast and the crew, and talk even more extensively about Chiang, while also contemplating the 'wandering hero' archetype, the level of violence in the film, and the basic competence of its execution.

"I really do like the wirework in this movie because..."

"It's not too over the top"

"It's not too over the top and also they knew when to cut. If you notice, a lot of the time, you'll just see David Chiang touchdown or land somewhere and they'll cut away so you don't get any awkward moments when he's adjusting. It's also a movie where you get to see the first progressions of the choreography where fights were becoming more elaborate, more spectacular. They were incorporating the trampolines and the wires, and giving people flashy stuff to do."

"They're trying stuff and figuring stuff out, you can definitely see."

The first film on the fifth platter is an exhilarating anthology, Chang's 1972 *Trilogy of Swordsmanship*. Each of the three stories has separate opening credits, and the first two were essentially directed by others. The initial piece, *The Iron Bow*, overseen by Yueh Feng, runs 32 minutes and feels more like the first act of a longer film, although taking that into account, it's a great first act. The owner of a restaurant and her daughter fight off the interests of a spoiled rich kid. He enlists the help of the authorities, and it turns into an all-out attack on the restaurant when a traveler with real skills stops by and the daughter falls for him. The fights are terrific and the piece has an accelerated mix of humor, action and romance that is almost irresistible, which is why it is a shame no one choose to expand it. The other two programs are complete mini-movies and are highly satisfying—frankly, this is one of the most rewarding anthology films we've ever sat through. The second segment, *The Tigress*, overseen by Kang Cheng, runs 45 minutes and is about a courtesan who helps a general capture a bandit and makes fools of everyone in the process, even her handsome lover. All of the pieces have exceptionally strong female characters, but in this segment it is most pronounced, and while there is less martial arts than there are in the other two stories, the plot is highly satisfying and the bordello setting is scrumptious. Chang's finale, *White Water Strand*, also runs 45 minutes and concludes with a magnificent and very bloody (all of the segments have some gore, but this one really lets it loose) street fight, as a group of rebels step in to save a master swordsman from a public execution in the town square on a trumped up charge. The carnage is glorious.

Leeder and Venema supply a commentary track throughout, providing summaries of the careers of many of the cast members in each film, talking about the directors, discussing the narratives of each segment and talking about anthology movies in general. And then, when they get to Chang's street fight at the end, they rise to the occasion. "Okay, this part makes me laugh, because when I watch it, imagine all of them ending up in Chinese purgatory, which is like heaven for them, and like those two guys died and [the fighter who killed them] shows up a minute later. They're like, 'You bastard! Oh god, we're here. Oh, that's the guy that killed us. He's with us!' a second later."

When a major character is killed with a simple sword into the chest, one of them laments that it is not gorier.

"I want to see him sliced in half vertically, that's what I want, and don't tell me that hasn't happened in a Chang Cheh film, because it has."

"The problem is, it happens in Chang Cheh's romantic comedies, too. That's why he lost that audience. Chang Cheh's version of **Friends** would have been they're all around that fountain, but it would have been full of blood and heads."

Additionally, there is an excellent 18-minute analysis of the feature that points out the shared themes and concepts in the three pieces, all based upon Peking Opera stories (but beware, the volume on the clips is louder than the volume on the narration).

Coming full circle, the final film in the set stars Fu Sheng in a genuine star vehicle, Chang's 1976 *The New Shaolin Boxers*. The film follows the standard template again—the hero, protecting innocent people, gets beaten up, trains with a master and then goes back to do the beating himself—but it not only takes full advantage of Fu Sheng's fighting skills, it also takes advantage of his

range as an actor, conveying both humor and drama. Additionally, the film presents an interesting social commentary more clearly than is usually the case. The townspeople would rather get hassled by the villains on a daily basis than stand up and do something about it, and are angry with the hero because he chooses the alternative. The costumes suggest the story is set in the Thirties, although no technology is seen, and the hero earns a living as a horse-drawn coach driver. Running 101 minutes, there are some supporting characters who are also in the good guy column, but unlike the films on the first platter, this is not an ensemble piece, and it demonstrates why, despite his tragic death from an automobile accident as his star was just beginning to nova, Fu Sheng is spoken of in the same conversation as Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan. He is not only an attractive and athletic fighter, but he has the personality and screen presence to carry every scene in a film, and he is the reason the film is compellingly entertaining from beginning to end.

Djeng and Worth supply the commentary, again going over the careers of the players and Chang, and paying special attention to the life of Fu Sheng. They also pay close attention to the narrative and the fights, and they, too, point out when the BD's picture is less than precise.

"This is not a defect, folks, this is actually just how the anamorphic lenses were."

"It's just a defect in the shooting. What was happening probably is because there was a lot of weather problems, and I think they were darkly lighting this for effect. You gotta open up the f-stop as high as you can. The thing with anamorphic lenses, the more you open up the f-stop, it actually can get more soft. It's not really necessarily out of focus, it becomes soft. I own a number of these lenses and that's absolutely what happens. But now it will clear right up. We're on a different day, now."

"They're probably shooting on a different day."

Warner's Archive Collection collections

Warner Bros.'s *Warner WB Archive Collection* has been taking Warner Blu-rays and combining them in multi-platter *Archive Collection* sets. In every instance, each platter in the set is the same platter that came in the previously released individual Blu-ray.

Take, for example, **6-Film Collection: Errol Flynn**, also identified as *Errol Flynn Collection*, from Turner Entertainment Co. and Warner (UPC#8839-29841615, \$60). We previously reviewed the two glorious Technicolor swashbuckling films in the collection on Blu-ray, **The Adventures of Robin Hood** (Nov 08) and **The Adventures of Don Juan** (Aug 22), as well as the black-and-white thriller, **Edge of Darkness** (Jun 10). The other three films in the set are also in black and white.

Flynn portrays a British privateer raiding the Spanish fleet in the special effects action feature of its age, Michael Curtiz's fantastic 1940 **The Sea Hawk**. The opening battle is an amazing mix of sets and miniatures (including a ship with working oars), made all the more thrilling by the massive cast (there are stuntmen everywhere on the decks and in the rigging), by Ernest Korngold's music and by Flynn's dashing ability to fight and shout out orders simultaneously. During a much calmer scene, the squared full screen framing has Brenda Marshall (who has a Geena Davis thing going) on a private balcony in the ship in the lower left, looking out over the water, while at the very top right, Flynn stands on the main deck, looking down and conversing with her. Later, when they are in a rose garden and cement the growing affection they have for each other, Flynn is still framed in a two-shot as higher and to the right while Marshall is lower and to the left. Curtiz's command over the performances and the images is consummate. Running 128 minutes, the film also features Flora Robson delivering a delightful performance as the sly Queen Elizabeth (and a warning to the audience at the end that 'one man,' referring to King Phillip of Spain but knowingly describing Adolf Hitler, cannot rule the world), Alan Hale, Claude Rains (as a secondary villain), Henry Daniell (as the main bad guy), Donald Crisp, Gilbert Roland and Edgar Buchanan (in an uncredited part but delivering several lines).

The black-and-white picture is solid and sharp, except during opticals, where the solidity of the image subsides in anticipation of the dissolve, and one or two segments that may have come from an alternate source. In the film's second act, the heroes travel to Panama in an attempt to hijack Spanish gold, and that sequence is in a sepia tone that effectively accentuates the heat and humidity of the location. The music is crisp, and the film is accompanied by optional English subtitles and a trailer.

Curtiz also directed the 1940 **Santa Fe Trail**, about the West Point graduates who would later become famous Civil War generals, in an early assignment coping with America's first major domestic terrorist, John Brown. The film has so much going on that Raymond Massey's wonderful, bug-eyed performance as Brown is easy to overlook, but it is a marvelous, over-the-top effort by an old school performer, and the film would be much weaker without it. Flynn portrays J.E.B. Stuart and Ronald Reagan is kind of his sidekick, George Armstrong Custer. Van Heflin and Hale also have major roles, and Olivia de Havilland is the love interest, although the screenwriters had to work overtime to find spots where she could appear. Running 109 minutes, the film dives right into the complicated moral attitudes of the day (Stuart, after all, ended up becoming a Confederate, and Brown, when all is said and done, was trying to free the slaves) and does a fairly good job at balancing the opinions of the characters to create a comprehensive portrait of the ethical conflicts and charged emotions that were involved. There is one scene where a slave wishes that he

could 'go back home' that crosses the line, but otherwise, the drama, while grossly simplified the way that Hollywood grossly simplified everything at the time, presents a viable portrait of the arguments that engulfed America in the years before the Civil War. More importantly, however, the handful of action scenes are superbly staged by Curtiz (as is one lovely sequence where a fortune teller 'predicts' the future), and while the finale at Harper's Ferry may get the basic facts wrong, it is a rousing and welcome climax.

The squared full screen black-and-white picture is somewhat soft in spots, but free of overt wear and generally dependable. We reviewed a public domain DVD in Jun 00 with a much weaker presentation. The monophonic sound is reasonably clean. There are optional English subtitles and a trailer.

Finally, Raoul Walsh's superb 1945 World War II adventure, **Objective, Burma!** (the platter and jacket art have no punctuation, but the fine print does), runs 142 minutes and depicts a small company dropped into the jungle to take out a Japanese radar installation. Flynn is the captain leading the two platoons. George Tobias, James Brown and William Prince costar, and not a single woman appears anywhere in the film. The mission goes smoothly, but the extraction is another matter. Without drawing attention to itself, the film has a wealth of educational details regarding the operations of war, from making a stretcher in the jungle to retrieving a glider. Flynn's performance is serious and no-nonsense (although his Australian accent slips through at one point), and he sets the tone for the film as a whole, which is both absorbing and exciting, with a minimum of clichés beyond the serviceman from Brooklyn providing the ethnic color. Even the film's length is advantageous, by making the viewer feel the test of stamina that the heroes are experiencing. At one point they uncover (offscreen) atrocities committed by the Japanese and we could not help but think that despite the illusion that wars are fought with rules, such atrocities and even worse ones, have always existed, continue to occur in warscape even today, and that no matter what advancements we achieve, human intelligence will never overcome its gaping flaws.

The squared full screen black-and-white picture is sharp and spotless from beginning to end. There were two instances of hidden splices where the image appeared to leap forward a frame or two, but otherwise the presentation is exhilarating, adding greatly to the vitality and relevance of the patriotic feature. We reviewed Warner's DVD in Aug 03, which was often a bit murkier, and the film did not play quite as well as a result. The monophonic sound is clear, and there is an effective score by Franz Waxman. Along with optional English subtitles and a trailer, there are two excellent Warner featurettes that originally appeared on the DVD, each running 20 minutes, the lovely color *The Tanks Are Coming*, from 1941, which stars Tobias, William Travis, and Gig Young, about tank training, and the black-and-white *The Rear Gunner* from 1943 with Reagan, Burgess Meredith and Tom Neal, about tail gunners on bombers.

A service comedy, a war film, a romance, a western and a disaster movie, Walsh's 1941 **They Died with Their Boots On**, released as a Turner and Warner *Archive Collection* Blu-ray (UPC#840418328637, \$25), is first and foremost a starring vehicle for Flynn, playing Custer, a military figure who was still in the vivid memories of a viable portion of the American population at the time. Made before America was flung back into war, the film addresses an issue brought to light after World War I of career soldiers adjusting to peacetime, and obviously, it twists history inside out to present Custer as a protector of the Indians (who by and large are treated with respect in the film) while everyone around him is trying to give them the shaft. But reality aside, the film gives Flynn an opportunity to combine his dashing screen persona as an action hero with his flair for impish humor and his ability to shift instantaneously into a romantic figure, seducing de Havilland's character simply by smiling at her. She, in turn, sells his stature and purity of heart with the persuasive admiration and desire of her gaze (take note, since the films make a particularly apt double bill in tone—in **Santa Fe**, Reagan loses de Havilland to Flynn, while in **Boots**, Flynn, playing Reagan's character from the earlier film, gets de Havilland). It is from that well tested and executed formula that the film dissolves almost all of the social shortcomings of its era. Even Hattie McDaniel, playing the family maid of de Havilland's character, displays a precision of comedic timing that more than excuses her outdated typecasting. She did her job very, very well, regardless of how that job is now frowned upon.

Running a whopping 142 minutes (longer than the 140-minute DVD we reviewed in May 05), the film is essentially a full Saturday afternoon's entertainment all of its own. Intriguingly, there are a couple of moments undermining the Production Code, one involving a Native American woman who has apparently had a baby with a scout played by Charlie Grapewin, and a line delivered with exquisite slyness by de Havilland about losing her own character's maidenhood. From the memorable casting of Sydney Greenstreet as Winfred Scott to the more challenging casting of Mexican Anthony Quinn as Crazy Horse, the film does its best to anchor itself in history, even as its narrative casts the truth adrift. If taken as an example of not just its era's attitudes, but of the obvious flaws in America's need to whitewash its past—as every civilization does—then the film can be accepted for the lessons it does carry in its flagrant alterations and exaggerations, and still enjoyed for the entertainment those changes create.

The squared full screen black-and-white picture is a substantial improvement over the uneven DVD presentation. The image is consistently flawless beyond an occasional natural grain. The detail and clarity add greatly to the energy the film manages to sustain throughout its lengthy running time. The monophonic sound is solid and clean, and there are optional English subtitles.

The BD also carries over the special features that appeared on the DVD, including a 10-minute retrospective piece, a trailer, a 4-minute introduction to the special features with Leonard Maltin, a 5-minute 1942 MGM newsreel (with a War Bond pitch), a 1941 Warner color short running 21-minutes entitled *Soldiers in White*, and a 7-minute 1942 color Warner *Merrie Melodies* cartoon entitled *A Tale of Two Kitties*.

We look forward to every time the 1952 William Keighley adaptation of the Robert Lewis Stevenson costume swashbuckler, Warner's **The Master of Ballantrae**, is upgraded on physical media, because that means that Jack Cardiff's gorgeous Technicolor cinematography becomes brighter and sharper on larger and larger screens, which is all the better to savor the eye-popping, Production Code-defying, see-thru braless top that dancer Gillian Lynne wears for her part as a lusty pirate wench. We reviewed Warner's beautiful DVD in Sep 03, and it was plenty clear then (after originally noticing it on the lovely LD we reviewed in Nov 92), but now Warner has issued an *Archive Collection* Blu-ray (UPC#840418337448, \$25), which is even sharper and more minutely detailed, so that she is not just on display in one prominent scene with Flynn, but every time she is on the screen, even in the background. Yeah, the film is great fun, too, one of Flynn's last unreservedly enjoyable action adventures (it is a shame they didn't start the series a decade or two earlier, because Flynn would have made an outstanding James Bond). Set in Scotland, Flynn's character is part of a rebellion against the British and must flee the country when the British win, becoming a pirate until he can save up enough booty to return. The film runs a brisk 89 minutes and yet still feels like it has covered a novel's worth of plot and emotion by the time the heroes ride off to seek more adventure.

Cardiff allows a couple of night scenes to look particularly murky and hazy, a choice that was probably more effective in theatrical presentations with weak projection bulbs than it is when the contrast to the more brightly lit sequences is abundantly clear. Nevertheless, the transfer looks flawless, with no more than a single hidden splice at one point, bringing rich detail to the fleshtones and outfits, and a special shine to the gold in the treasure chest. The monophonic sound is fine and there are optional English subtitles, along with a trailer and two color 7-minute 1952 Warner *Looney Tunes* cartoons, *Bully for Bugs* (the rabbit accidentally pops up in a bullring, and then takes on the affectations of a matador) and *Plop Goes the Weasel!* (the southern accented rooster complicates a dog's job of protecting baby chicks by letting a wacky weasel into the barnyard)—all things considered, it is a shame a cartoon with Yosemite Sam as a Scotsman or a pirate couldn't have been included.

Three outstanding actors star in a 2013 telefilm about Flynn's last days, produced in part by Todd Haynes and directed by Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland, **The Last of Robin Hood**, a Universal Pictures Home Entertainment Blu-ray (UPC#840418335857, \$20). Kevin Kline portrays Flynn, Dakota Fanning plays the underage teen dancer who Flynn fell for a couple of years before he passed away and Susan Sarandon plays the mother of Fanning's character, a classic Hollywood stage mother. It is the performances of all three stars that make the film consistently enjoyable—and more so if you precede it with a bushel of Flynn films that not only orient your attitude toward his presence, but underscore how perfectly Kline nails the part. Sarandon is also fearless in her role, overage and drinking too much as she tries to hustle her daughter's position into cash after Flynn passes away, and Fanning, who really has the most challenging part of all, it fully captivating as the young woman who genuinely enjoys Flynn's company and cares about him. Running 91 minutes, the film is both fascinating and touching, but gains a deeper resonance because of the depth the performers bring to their roles. The affairs of underage girls in Hollywood has long been a topic of scandal and deserved condemnation, but the film not only humanizes the situation, it also suggests that there are other perspectives to take into consideration, even if ultimately the morality of the power dynamic is still unacceptable.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1. The color transfer looks fine, and the film's late Fifties production designs are wonderful. The 5.1-channel DTS sound has a nominal dimensionality. There is an alternate German audio track and optional English and German subtitles. Universal also released the film on DVD (UPC#025192262241, \$15). The colors are fine but the picture is softer than the BD, and the drama is slightly less interesting as a result. The 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound is also less detailed. There are alternate Spanish, Portuguese and Thai subtitles, and optional English, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Thai and Indonesian subtitles.

Five platters are included in Warner's **4-Film Collection: Elizabeth Taylor** *Archive Collection* Blu-ray, also known as *Elizabeth Taylor Collection* (UPC#883929840533, \$40). This is because the Blu-ray presentation of John Huston's 1967 *Reflections in a Golden Eye* replicates the two-platter DVD release we reviewed in May 07 as part of **The Marlon Brando Collection**. One platter presents the film in what one associates with standard colors, while the other delivers the movie in an experimental golden tone that Huston employed to underscore the film's title. The thing is, both transfers are beautiful and each one works superbly. While the golden tint might be bothersome if that were how every movie looked, the uniqueness of its application and the meticulous care with which it has been applied—you can still differentiate hues despite the gold shading—energizes the film by giving it an otherworldly aura that matches the eccentricity of its narrative. You can, however, leap over immediately to watching the film in regular color and not feel that anything is lost or gained by

the transition. The compositions are still very striking and the bright hues are invigorating.

Based upon a Carson McCullers novel, the film is set in a Tennessee army installation, apparently an officer-training center of some sort, where Marlon Brando is an instructor and Taylor is his wife. Brian Keith is another, higher ranked instructor (Julie Harris plays his emotionally damaged wife), who is having an affair with Taylor's character that is pretty much common knowledge, while Brando's character is a repressed basket case who becomes obsessed with a private (who also has a creepy weird streak, cavorting naked with the fort's horses and later sneaking into the bedroom of Taylor's character to sniff her clothing while she sleeps) on the maintenance staff at the fort, played by Robert Forster in his first major screen part.

Running 109 minutes, the film was clearly too eccentric for general audiences, with or without the golden tint, and demonstrates the subtle challenges of adapting a novel to film. Yes, the narrative is transposed without difficulty, and while Brando's performance is a little campy (and Keith's is uninteresting), the film is well acted (Taylor is fabulous), but it just doesn't work on the screen the way that it would work on a page, where the severity of the emotional states of the characters are hidden between the words and left to the imagination. Huston dove into adapting literary works to the screen in the latter half of his career, sometimes with great success and sometimes falling short, but he was always experimenting, and in essence serving as a pathfinder for filmmakers yet to come. That said, the film just has too much star power and is too visually stimulating not to be worthwhile entertainment and besides, it makes a terrific and resonant double bill with another film that has been included in the set, **Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?** (Oct 16).

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The DVDs looked terrific, but the BDs have a more confident presence and sharper details. The monophonic sound is fine and both versions have optional English subtitles. Carried over from the DVD, the golden version (you can spot it right away, because the platter art is golden, too) comes with a trailer and 23 minutes of silent black-and-white behind-the-scenes footage set to the Toshirô Mayuzumi's musical score.

Also featured in the set are **Father of the Bride** (Oct 25) and **The Last Time I Saw Paris** (Jan 24).

Two certifiably great classic color musical motion pictures, a magnificent pair of black-and-white motion picture musical entertainments and another pair of terrific color musicals are combined in the overabundantly rich six-platter Warner *Archive Collection* Blu-ray release, **6-Film Collection: Judy Garland**, also known as *Judy Garland Collection* (UPC#883929841202, \$60). We reviewed one of the classics, *A Star Is Born*, in Jul 10. The other, Vincente Minnelli's amazing 1944 *Meet Me in St. Louis*, is a remarkable depiction of the dynamics within a lawyer's large family in 1903 St. Louis, just before the centenary celebration of the Louisiana Purchase, held as a World's Fair. The film samples each season leading up to the fair's opening and is centrally a romance between Garland's character and 'the boy next door,' although there is tension involving the love life of her older sister and deftly staged humor in the adventures of her youngest sister, as well as challenges facing other members of the family, to fill out the 113-minute feature. In addition to the carefully parceled narrative, there are memorable songs and engaging performances by every member of the cast, with Margaret O'Brien, as the youngest sister, earning second billing and rivaling Garland for attention and viewer affection. Richly nostalgic, every sequence in the film is masterfully staged, making the film highly repeatable as it skips from focal point to focal point before a viewer can become impatient with any individual scene or situation, while it uses the concept of family not just to explore love but to define the heart of America.

Included in the cast are Leon Ames, Mary Astor, Lucille Bremer, Tom Drake, Marjorie Main, Chill Wills and the late June Lockhart. The squared full screen picture has bright, finely detailed Technicolor hues and accurate fleshtones. The image is always fully presentable, but it is imperfect, with faint speckles and other fleeting irregularities showing up now and then. The 5.0-channel DTS sound is gentle, but has a lovely dimensional presence and some choice directional effects. There are alternate French and Spanish audio tracks and optional English, French and Spanish subtitles.

We reviewed a two-platter DVD in Apr 04. It was terrific at the time, but the BD improves upon both the fineness of the picture and the strength of the sound. Except for the still frame section, the special features on both DVD platters return on the one BD platter, including an isolated music track (the menu selection is buried in the 'Special Features' menu), a commentary by John Fricke, a 4-minute introduction, a 31-minute retrospective documentary, a 50-minute history of MGM from 1972, a 46-minute episode from a 1996 TV biographical series that charts Garland's career with clips from trailers, an atrocious 1966 *Meet Me in St. Louis* TV pilot running 26 minutes, a 1930 9-minute Warner black-and-white Vitaphone short entitled *Bubbles* that includes a very young Garland, a 3-minute black-and-white clip from 1941 of Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane performing an arrangement of *Skip to My Lou* used in the film, an hour-long audio-only *Lux Radio Theater* rendition of the film from 1946 with Garland, O'Brien and Drake (without the playback challenges that hampered the DVD); a 4-minute montage of images from the film set to a deleted number, *Boys and Girls Like You and Me*, and a trailer.

Garland and Mickey Rooney were peers. They not only worked for

the same studio, but being roughly the same age, the both grew up working for that studio and essentially had shared childhood experiences that other actors who had not grown up with them did not have. This created a charged screen magnetism between them, and it also allowed them the shorthand as performers to deliver scenes with an advanced set of skills and emotional exchanges that two performers who had never worked with one another before could not possibly establish and execute within a budgeted time frame. Their screen appeal reached its peak with a quartet of black-and-white musicals they made in the early Forties with Busby Berkeley and music by the greatest songwriters of the era including many songs that became standards, and two of those films can be found in the **Collection, Strike Up the Band and Girl Crazy.**

Berkeley directed the 1940 **Strike Up the Band**, which runs a full 120 minutes. The teenage Rooney and Garland characters are friends in the very first scene, and while romance kind of lingers in the air throughout the film, Rooney's character is for the most part oblivious to it, more concerned with the high school jazz band he has organized and raising enough money to participate in a national band contest being held by Paul Whiteman (playing himself). The narrative is episodic, mixing in brief character conflicts with increasingly elaborate musical numbers. There is also an amusing extended skit where the cast spoofs a Turn of the Century melodrama. Berkeley's great innovation in musicals, which had happened almost a decade before, was not just to expand the proscenium with elaborately timed movements from multitudes of dancers, it was also to make the camera one of the dancers. Rather than drawing back or remaining stationary, the camera would dive into the number itself, or move with the same rhythms that the dancers are moving, and that is his approach to both the smaller and larger numbers, which showcase the skills of both Garland and Rooney (his character plays the drums, and really lets loose on them at times) while underscoring and decorating their performances. His approaches to the dramatic scenes are basic and straightforward, and it is enough to keep the viewer involved in the feelings of the characters and the enthusiasm they have for music and for life.

The square full screen picture looks fine. Although it is a little soft at times, it is generally spotless. We reviewed the film previously as part of Warner's **Mickey Rooney & Judy Garland Collection** DVD set (Nov 07), and the presentation is stronger, with a clearer audio track and a better detailed image. The special features that appeared on the DVD are replicated, including the 6-minute *Do the Conga* number with a bland stereo mix, a 10-minute black-and-white *Pete Smith Specialty* short from 1941 entitled *Wedding Bills*, an 8-minute 1940 color cartoon with African-American crowds entitled *Romeo in Rhythm*, an hour-long 1940 *Lux Radio Theater* adaptation of the film with Rooney and Garland, a 14-minute promotional *Leo Is on the Air* audio segment, a 1941 defense bonds radio promotion with Rooney and Garland running 14 minutes, and a trailer. Additionally, there is a sweet 3-minute introduction to the film by the elderly Rooney.

We love all four of the films Garland and Rooney made with Berkeley, but our favorite is the 1943 **Girl Crazy**, which was directed by Norman Taurog, with Berkeley only overseeing the final 8-minute number, *I've Got Rhythm*. For one thing, Rooney and Garland are nominally more mature and no longer being sold as teenagers. The film is set in the Southwest, which immediately differentiates it from the others, spicing up both its production designs and its opportunities for humor. Rooney is a spoiled rich kid sent to a small college by his father to man him up, and Garland is the local postmistress and granddaughter of the college dean (played by the always engaging Guy Kibbee). Naturally, the college is in financial straits and putting on a show will be the best way to garner publicity and up the admissions, but that is relegated to the last act, when Tommy Dorsey comes to town. Nancy Walker has a marvelous supporting part and June Allyson is also featured. There are still some very nice song numbers before the finale (Rooney performs *Fascinating Rhythm* on the piano with Dorsey's band and Taurog keeps the camera on his hands, even in the long shots, so if he's not actually playing it, he's doing a damn good imitation of playing it), plenty of comedy business with horses and the challenges of the great outdoors, and the assured by-play between Garland and Rooney, which in effect is freshened by the alteration of their surroundings and then cemented by the confidence of their performances and the skills they had developed in playing off of one another. Essentially, you fall in love with Garland through Rooney's eyes.

The squared full screen picture is consistently sharp and free of wear, enhancing the presence of the performers. It too, is an improvement over the good looking picture on the film in the DVD set, and the monophonic sound is again more robust. Repeated from the DVD special features is another Fricke commentary, a 9-minute black-and-white 1943 Pete Smith *Specialty* short, *Hollywood Daredevils*, a 9-minute color cartoon from 1942 entitled *The Early Bird Dood It!*, another unimpressive 'stereo' presentation of the 8-minute *I Got Rhythm* number, a 2-minute audio-only presentation of an unused song entitled *Bronco Busters*, and a trailer. Also featured is another 4-minute introduction by Rooney.

Another film that kind of follows the 'putting on a show' template, MGM's 1950 **Summer Stock** was directed by Charles Walters and costars Gene Kelly, who doesn't show up in the film right away and whose screen presence is electrifying when it does. Not that Garland doesn't have complete control of the screen up to that point, since she opens the film singing in the shower (supposedly naked, but with the squared, full screen formatting, you can see the towel covering her) and proceeds to navigate her way through a marvelous barnyard of great character actors, including Main, Eddie Bracken and Ray

Collins. Adding to that, when Kelly finally shows up, he brings Phil Silvers with him. Already, the 109-minute film can pretty much do no harm. Without blackface, Silver imitates an African-American voice in one routine that might be alienating to some viewers, but his run-in with Bracken is vaudeville gold. Garland's character is a struggling farmer, while her sister, played by Gloria DeHaven, is off somewhere, and when her sister returns, she brings a full theater company with her, having promised them the barn for rehearsal without consulting Garland's character first. Walters shoots Garland singing one number from a slightly high angle that lets the camera look down her throat as she sings, but even that is not enough to break the spell of her talent as she delivers the number. When Kelly appears, it is like two celestial bodies entering the same orbit. Even his movements that have nothing to do with dance are captivating, and his dance numbers are riveting. There is one piece that he performs alone, without singing, dancing on a bare stage with just a piece of newspaper on the floor, that is only rivaled by Garland's solo, discarding her overalls and jeans to sing *Get Happy* in a sexy short skirt and tuxedo outfit, and their duets, singing and dancing, are consistently thrilling. Since the narrative is not only a sufficient context for the music and romance, but provides for plenty of decent farm animal gags as well, the film is a very satisfying entertainment and is especially welcome as a component of the larger collection.

The squared full screen color transfer is solid and spotless, and the monophonic sound is clear. While the production designs are more relaxed than on other MGM features, there is still coordination among the hues that take on an additional excitement with the sharpness and precision that the Blu-ray delivery provides. The monophonic sound is clear and strong, and there are optional English subtitles. Also featured is a great and informative 16-minute retrospective featurette (it was Garland's last film for MGM, and she struggled to get through it), a wonderful unused audio-only song with Silver entitled *Fall in Love* running 2 minutes, a 7-minute color MGM Tex Avery cartoon from 1950 entitled *The Cuckoo Clock* about a cat who is spooked at night in a dark mansion and takes it out on a clock that contains a live and wacky cuckoo bird, a Pete Smith *Specialty* short from 1949 running 8 minutes entitled *Did'ja Know? Have You Ever Wondered #3* enacting comedy skits about people facing challenging situations, and a trailer.

The 1949 **In the Good Old Summertime** makes an ideal double bill with **Meet Me in St. Louis**, because although both films span the seasons (**Meet Me in St. Louis** can, among other things, technically be considered a Halloween film), both films, in vivid Technicolor, richly decorated and set at the Turn of the Century, are, emotionally, Christmas movies. For anyone who really loves film, **Summertime** is a travesty, a woeful attempt by MGM to remake Ernst Lubitsch's already perfect black-and-white **The Shop around the Corner** as a color musical, directed by Robert Z. Leonard with the uncharismatic Van Johnson in the lead. After the incredible emotional textures and narrative intricacy of **Meet Me in St. Louis** (better if you watch that film second), it is simplistic and mechanical. But for viewers who are less demanding of their cinematic entertainment, there is Garland, delivering a lovely dramatic performance and several nice song numbers, there is Buster Keaton—you really can't take your eyes off of him—effectively cast in a supporting role and constantly doing physical business even when the action is supposedly elsewhere on the screen, and there is the dependable story, which is transposed to a 'music' store but delivers all the right beats as Johnson and Garland's characters, as workers in the store, constantly snipe at one another not realizing that in anonymous correspondence they have already fallen deeply in love. Thanks to the absolutely impeccable squared full screen image transfer on the Blu-ray, the always decorative picture lowers your defenses and Garland works her magic, so you tolerate Johnson and let the 103-minute film play out, enjoying its strengths (S.K. Sakall plays the owner of the store and Spring Byington is also featured) and placing fond memories of the original in a stocking to be opened later.

We reviewed a DVD release in Aug 05, and the BD is an improvement over what was already a very impressive release, sharpening the image and solidifying the details. Unlike **Meet Me in St. Louis**, the picture is flawless. The monophonic sound is also stronger and cleaner. There are optional English subtitles. The special features are carried over from the DVD, including a trailer, a 4-minute introduction and two color 1948 MGM James A Fitzpatrick *Traveltalks* shorts about Chicago (where the film is supposedly set), the 10-minute *Chicago, The Beautiful*, and the 9-minute *Night Life in Chicago*. And in case you haven't heard, the feature film's final shot is of a toddler Liza Minnelli with a deer-in-the-headlights expression (there are also a number of snapshots of her, slightly older, on set in the **Summer Stock** featurette, and on the other end of time, she provides the introduction on the **Meet Me in St. Louis** BD).

There are Technicolor movies, and then, there are Technicolor movies. Any Technicolor film with a decent transfer onto Blu-ray looks terrific, but some are positively astounding, and our favorite of all Technicolor presentations is Minnelli's 1948 MGM production, **The Pirate**. Other films, including others made by Minnelli, employ colors more evocatively and could easily vie for the supremacy without complaint, but what **Pirate** has that they do not is variety and juxtaposition. Set in an earlier century on a Caribbean island, but shot on the MGM lot utilizing their set and costume designers, every design and prop is elaborately hued and each color is selected to be in coordination with the colors around it, creating one eye-popping moment after another. Combine that with a transfer of source material that has the advantage of post-War freshness and the

probability, um, that MGM did not have to go back to the well to generate copies of the film from that source material as often as was needed for their better known and more popular hits, and the Blu-ray, included as part of Warner's **4-Film Collection: Gene Kelly**, an *Archive Collection* Blu-ray set also known as *Gene Kelly Collection* (UPC#883929841912, \$40), is sheer chromatic ecstasy. Fortunately, the film, which stars Kelly and Garland, although eccentric, is quite delightful and deserving of the effort that went into its transfer. Even though you can see every microfiber used in a gag, piano wire used in a stunt, and single strand of Garland's hair out of place in a slight breeze, the vivid detail of the image from one corner of the squared full screen picture to the other is riveting.

Cole Porter got his start writing revues in college, and when he transitioned to Broadway, the same format was popular. Unless a production was an operetta or quasi-operetta, it was simply a string of catchy, witty songs, with little more than a sketchy premise to merge them with comedy routines and create the illusion that audiences were paying for more than a randomly booked vaudeville show. By the Fifties, stage musicals had more accomplished narratives, and that was actually pushed along, in part, by the need for motion picture musicals to have a binding plot. But old habits are hard to break and **The Pirate**, which was written by others but infused with songs by Porter, is more loosely or differently structured than the typical movie musical. While never breaking the fourth wall or becoming what today is known as 'meta,' the film teeters on continually winking at its audience, doubly so since Kelly portrays a traveling performer who is always winking at his audience. Garland portrays a popular girl in a village who is betrothed to the town's mayor, played by Walter Slezak, but secretly wishes she could meet a famous pirate. Made up, on purpose, as if someone was trying to have him look like Flynn from memory, with a tangle of hair and an insipid mustache, Kelly's character learns of her desire and decides to fulfill it himself, pretending to be the pirate. There are a couple of clever plot turns, but no one seems interested in advancing the story smoothly. Rather, it just kind of leaps from one idea to the next, slipping in songs and slapstick whenever possible. The songs are generally not among Porter's best remembered tunes, but they are Porter's nevertheless, and so each is immediately captivating—after all, who else rhymes 'star' with 'caviar?' And as for the slapstick, there is one extended sequence where Garland is throwing vases and other items at Kelly that is remarkably choreographed and really quite amazing. The 101-minute film has an almost too perfect Hollywood ending (spoiled only by the insistence upon presenting Garland and Kelly in unflattering comical performance makeup), and yet takes a rather loopy path to get there, but thanks to the music, the talented players and the wonderful colors, it is well worth visiting again and again.

Warner's DVD (Sep 07) also looked fantastic, but the colors are not quite as smooth or finely detailed as they are on the BD, and the sound is not as strong. Carried over from the DVD is a commentary by Fricke, an 8-minute black-and-white Pete Smith *Specialty* comedy short from 1948 entitled *You Can't Win*, an 8-minute color Tom and Jerry cartoon from 1946 entitled *Cat Fishing*, a 19-minute retrospective documentary, 17 minutes of audio outtakes from three musical numbers, 13 minutes of audio-only 'guide track' orchestrations, a 5-minute radio interview with Garland, a 4-minute audio interview with Kelly, and a trailer.

Gene Kelly also includes one of the greatest and most fabulously colorful films ever made, **Singin' in the Rain** (Jun 22—and just imagine, if you get the collection, then you can have both *Be a Clown* and *Make 'Em Laugh* at your fingertips at the same time!), Minnelli's fabulously colorful **An American in Paris** (May 09), and another team up of Kelly and Garland, albeit in black and white, **For Me and My Gal** (Jul 22)

Among the four black-and-white MGM features presented on Blu-ray in Warner's **4-Film Collection: Clark Gable**, also known as *Clark Gable Collection* (UPC#8839298450618, \$40), is the 1935 Best Picture Oscar winner, **Mutiny on the Bounty**, directed by Frank Lloyd for MGM. A captivating adventure with both seafaring excitement and exotic romance, it is a genuinely impressive production and, running 132 minutes, is actually very efficient in presenting a relatively complex narrative. Charles Lawton is the resentful and unforgetting captain, and Gable is his noble first mate who, nevertheless, can only take so much abuse, with Franchot Tone as another ship's officer who is caught in the middle. While you dislike his character, there is no denying that Laughton's performance is both gutsy and unrelentingly intense, so that while, after the mutiny, you want to follow the fate of Gable's character, the film is able to spend more time with Laughton through the force of his presence, and can thus present a comprehensive and edifying depiction of what happened. Meanwhile, whenever the film needs relief, it just cuts to Gable's smile.

The squared full screen picture is in reasonably good shape. Here and there a thin vertical line can be seen, and there are a couple of splices, but for the most part, the image is sharp and clear. The monophonic sound is fine. There are alternate French, Spanish, Portuguese and German audio tracks, optional English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, German and Norwegian subtitles, a trailer, a nice minute-long newsreel clip of the film winning the Oscar, and a fascinating 10-minute 1935 black-and-white MGM featurette entitled *Pitcairn Island Today*, clearly intended as a promotion for the film and incorporating substantial documentary footage shot on the island, depicting life there, including footage of the great-grandson of Gable's character.

Still fresh in the minds of most adults when the film first came out, the

1936 **San Francisco** states right up front that it is about the 1906 San Francisco earthquake (and subsequent fire), and then opens up several months beforehand, so the viewer can become involved in a musical romance between Gable, whose character owns a saloon on the Barbary Coast, and Jeanette MacDonald, a virginal singer who is trying to make her start in the sinful city. Spencer Tracy (who gets off a great ad lib, "That reminds me, that Rooney kid ducked Mass.") has a secondary role as a priest and the childhood buddy of Gable's character, and Jack Healy is one of the entertainers in the music hall. Robson is also featured. Except for a strong spiritual message that may be a turn off to some viewers, the film is brilliantly structured because, in effect, the story is strong enough to stand up without the earthquake, while the quake itself is such a special effects extravaganza that it is still not just impressive, but thrilling, even today. Running 115 minutes and directed by W.S. Van Dyke, the film is also a great vehicle for Gable and for MacDonald, and each one does as good a job selling the appeal of their costar as they sell themselves. And as for that spiritual message, which permeates the entire film like an ominous, San Francisco fog, it is fully justified by the film's design, with the filmmakers not only causing the disaster, but determining who lives and who dies amid the destruction.

The squared full screen picture is often somewhat soft, but that condition is better suited to the transition that must occur when the optical effects kick in at the climax, and otherwise the image is free of any wear or other impediments. More importantly, the monophonic sound is excellent. Not only are MacDonald's highest and longest notes never distorted, but while it isn't Sensurround, the opening rumbles of the quake still pack quite a wallop. We reviewed a DVD in Nov 09. The picture is only slightly improved, but the audio track is much stronger. Special features carried over from the DVD include a silent half-minute alternate cut of the last shots, a trailer, a 10-minute 1936 color MGM cartoon entitled *Bottles*, a colorful 9-minute 1940 *James A. Fitzpatrick's Traveltalks* short entitled *Cavalcade of San Francisco*, an 8-minute 1939 *Traveltalks* entitled *Night Descends on Treasure Island* in color, and a 46-minute profile of Gable from 1996 narrated by Liam Neeson, although **San Francisco** is not mentioned in the program.

A superbly performed, star-powered romance, Clarence Brown's 1936 **Wife versus Secretary** has Gable as a successful magazine publisher, Myrna Loy as his loving wife and, cast both in and against type, Jean Harlow as his ultra-smart, ultra-efficient hot secretary. Back when MGM didn't know what to do with him, James Stewart plays the secretary's boyfriend. Gable's character wants his company to make a major purchase and he has to keep it absolutely secret in order to avoid a bidding war, so only Harlow's character knows about it, and they have to spend a lot of time together, which irritates Stewart's character and gets Loy's character thinking bad things. Now why Gable's character couldn't share his secret with his wife as well, especially if he made her promise to keep it under wraps, never appears to cross his mind, but then there wouldn't be a movie if he did. Running a concise 87 minutes, the film is entertaining as all get out because the four stars demonstrate why they are stars, nailing the emotional nuances of their parts while glowing in universal appeal. At the same time, the story explores the essential problems that women face wherever they go—Gable's character doesn't want to give Harlow's character a promotion because he is too dependent upon her where she is—and how, ultimately, it is up to the women to save the day.

The squared full screen picture is in terrific condition, with bright contrasts and clearly defined details. The monophonic sound is also strong and clear. Also featured is a trailer and an enjoyable 18-minute black-and-white 1936 MGM *Crime Does Not Pay* short, *The Public Pays*, about mobsters shaking down the milk distribution industry until the cops go undercover as milkmen.

The fourth film in **Clark Gable** is **Idiot's Delight**, which we reviewed in Sep 24.

Gary Cooper's 1941 Oscar-winning performance in **Sergeant York** is part of Warner's **4-Film Collection: Gary Cooper**, also known as *Gary Cooper Collection*, another *Archive Collection* Blu-ray set (UPC#883929840779, \$40). Cooper portrays the World War I hero in Howard Hawks's elaborate 134-minute feature, although in the first 74 minutes he is a Kentucky hillbilly overcoming alcoholism and trying to better himself. It is only in the final hour that the film advances to boot camp and its enlivened war sequences. The drama has a steady presence of humor, but with Hawks's overriding maturity it does not shy away from its serious moments. Walter Brennan plays the owner of the general store and a preacher, who patiently sets Cooper's character on the right path. While not as overbearingly spiritual as **San Francisco**, the film embraces the same sort of trust and respect for a higher power as it explores the conflict between the commandment about not killing someone and the requirements of patriotic duty.

Cooper brings a sense of joy to his presence that seamlessly unites the film's action, comedy, romance and pathos. Tobias, Joan Leslie, Howard Da Silva, Stanley Ridges, Dickie Moore and Ward Bond costar, and Lockhart shows up, as well, as the sister of Cooper's character. One of the hallmarks of Hawks's work on the film is how textured the characters are, effectively bridging the film's production designs with its drama. The squared full screen black-and-white picture is consistently smooth and sharp, and is free of noticeable wear. We reviewed a two-platter DVD release in May 09, which also had a decent transfer, although the BD picture is generally sharper and more detailed. The monophonic sound is stronger, and there are optional English subtitles. The Jeanine Basinger commentary has been carried over from the DVD, along with a

trailer, a 9-minute two-tone color Warner *The Sports Parade* featurette from 1941 entitled *Lions for Sales*, a 6-minute black-and-white *Looney Tunes* cartoon from 1941 entitled *Porky's Preview*, and a good 39-minute retrospective documentary that appeared on the second DVD platter. The career profile of Cooper that was also on the second platter has not been included.

William Wyler's 1956 Allied Artists pastoral comedy about a Quaker sect living in southern Indiana during the Civil War, "**Friendly Persuasion**", climaxes with a darker sequence about the consequences of war that runs about a half hour. Most of the film, however, is lighthearted, and is primarily about one family, with Cooper as the patriarch, Dorothy Maguire as his wife (who is portrayed as being a figure of substantial authority, but actually has none at all) and Anthony Perkins as the eldest son. The film runs another 134 minutes, but is not as invigorating as **Sergeant York**, attempting to get by on the charms of Cooper's smirk, the eccentricity of the Quaker practices and the quaintness of the period setting. It is also another attempt to reconcile the necessities of defense with the belief of non-violence, but the answer it seems to offer is to be as non-violent in a situation as you can be without putting yourself in danger. The image on the BD, letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1, is sharp and solid, energizing the film with bright hues and rich fleshtones. While the DVD (Feb 01) looked okay, the image has been cleaned up and sharpened even more for the BD. The presentation adds to the entertainment but does not entirely disguise its shortcomings. The monophonic sound is passable and there are optional English subtitles, along with a trailer and a 10-minute black-and-white production featurette originally broadcast on TV in 1955.

A great deal has been written about the pairing of older male movie stars with much younger female movie stars in romantic films, often disparagingly, but if that was not what the boxoffice appreciated, filmmakers wouldn't do it. Audrey Hepburn, however, seemed to be an exception. Not only could she pull off romantic attraction with men who were actually younger than her, such as Peter O'Toole and Albert Finney, but her desire for men 30 years older than her, such as Fred Astaire, Humphrey Bogart and Cooper, was utterly believable and palpable, even if it was simply a performance. She starred with Cooper in what was maybe the closest Wilder came to imitating his mentor, Lubitsch, the exquisite 1957 Allied Artists romantic comedy, **Love in the Afternoon**. Maurice Chevalier (like Cooper, a Lubitsch veteran) is a Parisian private detective and Hepburn is the daughter he has had to raise on his own who, as she comes of age, becomes obsessed with his files and his marital cases. When she overhears the plans of a client played by John McGiver to shoot his wife's lover, she rushes to the hotel to prevent the murder, and falls for the lover, played by Cooper, herself. The film runs 129 minutes and is constructed primarily around the interludes the two have together, mostly but not exclusively in the hotel room. She does not tell him her name or pretend that he is anything more than a casual fling, but over the course of a year or two during his visits to Paris, he becomes smitten. The film has a multitude of beautiful moments—at one point, she tries to write a note to him, but ends up burning her drafts in an ashtray instead, and Wilder lingers forever upon her as the flames gradually swell. The discretions of the Production Code era play into both the film's visual metaphors and the power those representations achieve, by making the viewer's imagination fill the gaps. Cooper's character is a raunchy and wealthy playboy, but Cooper does not play him that way, and so he never seems duplicitous or underhanded. And hence, when he meets Hepburn's character, everything about the world that mystifies him or that he doesn't understand and wants to understand is channeled into her, while her character, who already has an older father and a tiresome peer boyfriend, not only sees what Cooper's character needs, but knows that she can be and wants to be the one who fulfills him. Taking its time, but doing so with wit and the enduring attraction of the two stars, the film builds to an exquisite romantic crescendo and is one of Wilder's many enduring masterpieces.

The black-and-white picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The image has a natural but pronounced grain and is otherwise in very nice shape. On a large screen, shots may look overly soft, but the mood is sustained and the image is perfectly clear when the film intends to let you see an expression or an object, and is only soft when it is making your imagination do the work. We reviewed a DVD in Jan 03 and the BD is a substantial improvement, eliminating much of the image's age and wear. Dialog is a little raspy now and then, but generally, the monophonic sound is in fine shape. There are optional English subtitles and a trailer.

Also featured in the set is the excellent and little-seen Delmer Daves western, **The Hanging Tree** (Mar 18).

One of the many advantages of the collections is the opportunity to savor the work of a particular artist, and in the case of Warner's four-platter *Archive Collection* Blu-ray pack, **4-Film Collection: Greta Garbo**, also titled **Greta Garbo Collection** (UPC#883929841974, \$40), this enables the viewer to submerge in Garbo's dramatic performances from **Anna Christie** (Feb 24), **Queen Christina** (Aug 23) and **Camille** (Apr 23) before putting on the romantic comedy that plays masterfully against the persona she establishes in those films (particularly **Camille**) with Lubitsch's marvelous 1939 MGM feature, **Ninotchka**. Aided by a precisely toned script from Wilder and Charles Brackett, and further embellished by a near-spotless squared full screen black-and-white image transfer, the film uses its perfectly timed comedy to create a background for Garbo's exquisite deadpan, which then merges laughter with love like a

flower that suddenly blossoms. She plays a Soviet trade representative sent to Paris to enhance the USSR's cash reserves by selling jewels owned by the state, and Melvin Douglas is a representative of the former Russian aristocracy living in Paris, claiming the jewels belong to his clients. When the resolution to the conflict is delayed, the Garbo and Douglas characters, who are immediately attracted to one another, fall in love. That Garbo's character is also seduced by the bountiful luxuries of capitalism is the initial basis for the film's humor and a continuing counterpoint to the apparent non-ideological purity of their relationship. Running 110 minutes, once the premise is established, its humor revealed and the romance consummated with the laugh, the film then drifts along very pleasantly on the skills of the artists both in front of the camera and behind it.

Ina Claire, Felix Bressart, Sig Rumann and Alexander Granach costar, with a nearly unrecognizable Bela Lugosi in a straight role as a Soviet official. The cinematography is naturally grainy, and in one or two darker scenes that grain is more pronounced, but overall the image is impeccable, and its clarity consistently adds to Garbo's allure. The monophonic sound contains some great gags of its own and is reasonably strong. There are alternate French, Spanish and Portuguese audio tracks; optional French, Spanish and Portuguese subtitles; a trailer; an informative 11-minute black-and-white MGM short from 1939, *Prophet without Honor*, profiling the pre-Civil War era oceanographer, Matthew Fontaine Maury, who was the first to comprehensively chart ocean winds and currents, and also laid the groundwork for what today is NOAA despite a career hiccup as a Virginian in the Confederacy; and a 1939 color 7-minute MGM cartoon, *The Blue Danube*, evocatively bringing the Johann Strauss waltz to life in a pastoral setting with animals, cherubs and naked winged nymphs either making wine or dyeing the source of the river blue—it is hard to tell, but it is an elaborate production that is quite impressive if you aren't distracted by the nymphs.

Joan Crawford appeared with Garbo in MGM's 1932 Best Picture Oscar winner, **Grand Hotel** (Aug 23), which has therefore been included in Warner's **4-Film Collection: Joan Crawford Archive Collection** Blu-ray set, also known as *John Crawford Collection* (UPC#883929841929, \$40).

Crawford plays the villain in the George Cukor's memorable 1939 **The Women**, based upon a Clare Boothe stageplay. Norma Shearer stars, with Rosalind Russell, Joan Fontaine, Paulette Goddard, Mary Boland, Phyllis Povah, Virginia Grey, Ruth Hussey, Hedda Hopper, Main (again), and Butterfly McQueen. Since not a single man is to be seen anywhere in the film (except, if you're looking for a 'gotcha,' there may be a male vendor glimpsed in a 'home movie' presentation of a Bermuda vacation), the film might make an interesting double bill with **Operation, Burma!**. At 133 minutes, it would certainly make for a long afternoon. In any case, the film is brilliantly structured (things that happen early on always affect what happens later on), marvelously witty ("Living alone has its compensations. Heaven knows it's marvelous to be able to spread out in bed like a swastika.") and abundantly flowing with estrogen. The offscreen husband of Shearer's character has an affair with Crawford's character, leading to a Reno divorce and then a glorious final scene back in a New York powder room. At the same time, amid the catty sniping and witty rejoinders, there is a comprehensive and thoughtful exploration of attitudes regarding love, romance and partnership, across several generations. Despite later remakes, the film remains a unique accomplishment which has strengthened over the years, as every subsequent generation discovers that nothing the film exposes has changed, in the slightest.

We reviewed a good looking DVD in May 03. The squared full screen black-and-white picture is slightly smoother, which makes the story flow even more effectively, but in general the improvements are limited. The film's one color sequence, however (a fashion show, which may seem extraneous but actually accentuates the very heart of the film's perspective), is both brighter and sharper than it is on the DVD. The monophonic sound is fine and there is an alternate Spanish audio track, optional English, French and Spanish subtitles, a trailer, a 6-minute black-and-white version of the color segment, an 11-minute 1940 black-and-white MGM short, *Hollywood: Style Center of the World*, a 10-minute 1939 black-and-white MGM short called *From the Ends of the Earth* about film set construction, and an impressive 42-minute audio-only replication of the film's scoring sessions in stereo, all carried over from the DVD. Also featured is a color 1939 MGM cartoon running 9 minutes, *One Mother's Family*, about a hen, her brood and a wayward chick that continually gets into trouble.

Vincent Sherman's "**The Damned Don't Cry!**" begins with the body of a gangster being dumped in the desert by two men. As the police investigate they uncover home movies at the gangster's Las Vegas (which sure looks like Palm Springs) home, and prominent in those movies is a woman who looks a great deal like Crawford. It is only then that the film finally cuts to Crawford's character and then flashes back to tell how she rose from being a struggling housewife to living the life of luxury with gangsters fighting over her. Fun stuff. Running 103 minutes, the film is consistently entertaining as you follow her ditching her husband, moving to the big city, getting a job behind a counter, and then as a model, and then glomming onto a straightlaced accountant played by Kent Smith, whom she uses as a tool to improve a mobster's profits, and her own. David Brian and Steve Cochran costar in the 1950 Warner production.

The squared full screen black-and-white picture is smooth and spotless. The DVD we reviewed in Jul 06 looked fine, but the BD's picture is

even nicer, and the monophonic sound is strong. There are optional English subtitles, a trailer, a 14-minute retrospective documentary and a lackluster commentary from Sherman that are all carried over from the DVD. Additionally, there is an adept 60-minute *Great Director's Playhouse* radio adaptation from 1951 with Crawford and Frank Lovejoy (and a Chesterfield commercial from Bob Hope and Bing Crosby).

Another entertaining melodrama, the 1947 **Possessed** ultimately writes itself into a disappointing corner, but until then it is an engrossing and compelling tale that at times even appears to verge on the supernatural. Crawford is the nurse to the troubled wife of an oil financier nicely played by Massey. She is obsessed with an engineer played by Heflin who works for Massey's character, and remains obsessed even after the wife dies and Massey's character marries her. Directed by Curtis Bernhardt for Warner, the 108-minute film gives Crawford an opportunity to flex her performance in earnest (she copped an Oscar nomination for it), and even Heflin is marvelous, his character's patience stretched by her relentlessness. There is a terrific hospital hallway shot from Crawford's point of view as she is being wheeled along on a stretcher, and other moody, evocative moments throughout the film, some of them quite eerie. On the other hand, the opening of the film is explicitly set in Los Angeles, but after the film-long flashback is concluded and Massey's character rushes to her side, it was well established in the flashbacks that he is living in Washington D.C., and indeed, even the circumstances leading to the trauma occurred on the East Coast, so how did everybody end up there?

The squared full screen black-and-white picture looks fine and is a marked improvement over the DVD we reviewed in Jul 07. The monophonic sound is okay, including a vigorous Waxman musical score, and there are optional English subtitles. A trailer and a 10-minute retrospective documentary have been carried over from the DVD, along with a decent commentary track from Forties black-and-white film expert, Drew Casper.

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