

television even if the rest of the show does not, works not only because the special effects are gross and unrestrained, but because a viewer is invested in the characters and because the totality of the sequence accomplishes what is intended, to make the viewer think about the human birthing process from a different perspective.

The six double-sided platters each contain two of the twenty-two 47-minute episodes per side, except the 95-minute pilot and the standard-length finale, the latter appearing by itself with a 4-minute promotional featurette that was shot during the production. There is no 'Play All' option, and the chapter encoding does not reliably take you past the opening titles to the start of the episode. The picture quality is generally dull and at times a little pinkish and soft, though for the most part it is acceptable. The stereo sound has a rudimentary dimensionality that is most effective when the score—one of the show's few genuinely sophisticated components—surges to the foreground. There is an alternate monophonic Spanish track and optional English and Spanish subtitles. Johnson supplies a reasonably informative talk about how the show was organized, what he wanted to accomplish and the challenges that confronted him. "If you want ten African-American extras or ten Native-American extras, you can bring them in and that's not a problem, but if you need ten 'alien' extras, then that also means you need about ten makeup people extra, as well. One of the reasons we had to shoot the series in Los Angeles was because there were just not enough skilled makeup people in other parts of the world."

### Demme's Haiti documentary

Jonathan Demme began interviewing Haitian radio operator and reporter Jean Dominique in the late Eighties, clearly with an eye towards putting together an eventual documentary profile, a project that sadly came to fruition after Dominique was murdered for his outspoken political stances. Having spent his life in radio, Dominique is adept at organizing his thoughts as he speaks, and he has a captivating screen personality. Demme's 2003 feature, **The Agronomist**, released by New Line Home Entertainment (N7853, \$28), conveys a decent thumbnail sketch of the history of Haiti and its manipulation both by foreign powers and greedy domestic dictators, which is combined with a compelling profile of Dominique. Up to a point, the 91-minute film seems to demonstrate how one man can stand against powerful forces and make at least a small difference, and Dominique did live into his seventies before being gunned down, so in a way he succeeded even if he did ultimately push a little too hard. Demme withholds the tragedy until the film's very end, creating a moving conclusion but also avoiding the use of it earlier to undercut Dominique's optimism and perseverance. Even as time passes, the recurring struggles in Haiti will likely sustain the film's relevance and make it an ideal choice for background information as each new conflict arises.

The full screen picture is adequately presented. Wyclef Jean was responsible for the film's musical score, which is effectively served by the stereo surround soundtrack. The film is mostly in English, although there are segments in French, and is accompanied by default English subtitling for the French passages, or full optional English, French and Spanish subtitles.

### Wallace & Gromit reach feature length

The feature-length installment of Nick Park's clay animation series about a human inventor and his faithful/resourceful canine companion, **Wallace & Gromit The Curse of the Were-Rabbit**, has been released by DreamWorks Home Entertainment (94342, \$30). Running 85 minutes, which is just about the combined running time of Park's first three Wallace & Gromit films (Jan 01), the elaborate narrative, about a giant rabbit that is terrorizing the community during a full moon, accommodates the expansion reasonably well, although the narrative is not as tightly plotted or concluded as the shorter films were. There are many humorous and inventive moments, and plenty of cute expressions to keep a viewer involved with the story and the action.

The picture is presented in letterboxed format only, with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The color transfer is excellent, with crisp, finely detailed hues. The 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound has some playful directional effects and is competently delivered. There is an alternate French audio track in 5.1 Dolby, an alternate Spanish track in standard stereo, optional English, French and Spanish subtitles, 13 minutes of deleted and alternate scenes (including two even weaker endings), a decent 20-minute piece about Park and his previous films, a 13-minute promotional documentary (the 2005 film was co-directed by Steve Box), a good 8-minute look at the British studios where the film was produced, a 3-minute segment on building a minor model, and a good still photo section with behind-the-scenes shots and close-ups of details within the film.

There is also an 11-minute animated short by Box from 1997 called *Stage Fright*, about a rivalry between a vaudevillian and a silent film comic. It is kind of a dark work, with less expressive characters than those associated with Park, but fans will still find it interesting. There is an alternate commentary for it by Box. "It was kind of a really fantastic opportunity for me to play and, you know, hone my skills a little bit. Looking back at it, I find so much of it kind of a bit awkward and embarrassing, but it was a great opportunity to show I could make a film on my own, really. I'd do it very differently now."

Box and Park supply a commentary for the feature as well. They do mention a few production details, but they spend most of their time talking about preliminary or discarded ideas for each scene.

### A nation of bird fanciers gets a cartoon

Great Britain, the country whose first feature-length animated film was based upon a story by George Orwell, now brings us pigeons fighting World War II in the 2005 computer-animated **Valiant**, a Walt Disney Home Entertainment release (41049, \$30). Other than the pigeons being a little stiff and weird looking—in other words, British—the film is effectively conceived, with good action sequences, plenty of humor and moments of distinctive artistry. Running 76 minutes, the story is reasonably straightforward. The young hero goes on a mission across the Channel with his compatriots to retrieve an important dispatch after the previous messenger was abducted by Teutonic hawks. His diminutive size enables him to save the day, with the help of his friends.

The picture is presented in letterboxed format only, with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The image is sharp and exact. The 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound is best held to a modest volume, but is fully dimensional. There are optional English, French and Spanish subtitles, a minute's worth of faux 'bloopers,' and a fairly simple shape choice game.

### What happened in between

The Walt Disney Home Entertainment made-for-video animated sequel, **Bambi II** (35242, \$30), depicting the young deer's experiences after his mother dies and before the testosterone sets in, ignores the science that was such an integral part of the original film and compromises, as one supposes it must, on the lines and details of the characters and backgrounds. The story is primarily about his relationship with his father (voiced too recognizably by Patrick Stewart), but there are interludes where he plays with the other kiddie animals and engages in mindless frolics with other young deer. Unlike its hero, the film never comes close to achieving the stature of its predecessor, but young viewers will be placated by its activities and the momentum of the story that eventually develops. The action sequence in the last act is fully suspenseful and reasonably artistic. The film's official running time is 73 minutes, but the end credits start scrolling shortly after the hour mark.

The picture is presented in letterboxed format only, with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The color transfer is fine. There is a basic dimensionality and a few directional effects that are delivered with plenty of energy on the 5.1-channel Dolby Digital track and the DTS track. There is an alternate French audio track in 5.1 Dolby and optional English subtitles. Another subtitling option offers up sporadic information about wildlife and such. There is an 8-minute production documentary, a 4-minute segment about drawing rabbits (with additional material on DVD-ROM), and a pointless direction game.

### European blues

Two concerts are combined on the Inakustik release, **Blues Company • Keeping the Blues Alive** (INAK6002DVD, \$20), a 35-minute performance in September of 2003 at Lahnstein, Germany and a 61-minute performance in November of 2003 at Halle, Germany. Blues Company is an engaging European blues band, featuring Todorovic and Mike Titre on guitars and vocals, with Ollie Gee on Bass and Florian Schaub on drums, backed by Uwe Nolopp and Robert Kretschmar on horns. Although Todorovic was born in Germany, with Yugoslavian parents, his vocals have a totally American twang, and the entire band is basically indistinguishable from one found in Chicago or New Orleans, which is part of the fun of the show's visual component, as all of the musicians are clearly geeks in their native lands, striving and succeeding to transport themselves to a higher plane through the universality of their music.

The full screen picture is at the mercy of the stage lights but is reasonably sharp. The 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound is smooth and clear. There is a good 16-minute interview with Todorovic, a 4-minute scrolling text profile of the band, a 3-minute discography montage and a 4-minute montage of publicity photos.

### Dull Disney songs

A bland Disneyland concert that is enhanced visually with clips of cartoons, **Jim Brickman At the Magic Kingdom The Disney Songbook**, is available from Walt Disney Records (614199, \$17). Shot live in 2005 at a Disney Florida theme park, Brickman, a pianist, is accompanied by various singers for various numbers, but whether he is pounding out the tunes by himself or supporting the vocals, the songs, mostly from the Disney canon (a Lerner & Lowe number is slipped in), are colorless, and no amount of cartoon cutaways can enliven them. The 86-minute concert has a functional blandness—there is nothing 'bad' or inept about it, even when Michael Bolton shows up. It is just that you can imagine being hooked up to some sort of polygraph monitor and having the needles never budge as you watch the show.

The full screen image is sharp and accurately colored. The stereo sound is generally centered but adequately delivered. There is no captioning. A music video is included, along with a 4-minute production featurette.