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Directed by “Ice Age”’s Carlos Saldanha, animated family film “Rio” centers on a rare, domesticated macaw, Blu (voiced by Jesse Eisenberg, who must have beaten out a crestfallen Simon LeBon), who lives an easy life in Minnesota. Believing he’s the last of his kind, Blu has never spread his wings and learned to fly — both figuratively and literally. When he learns of a female counterpart in Rio de Janeiro, Jewel (voiced by Anne Hathaway), however, Blu sets off a wild adventure and makes some new friends along the way.



The supporting vocal performance (from George Lopez, Tracy Morgan and Jamie Foxx, among others) are energetic and peppy, but not always helped by material that is kind of beat-by-beat and expected. Still, “Rio” benefits from an engaging visual palette and an infectious energy and sense of fun that more or less artfully disguises the “medicine” of its moralizing yet easily digestible life lessons. What the movie lacks in novelty it more than makes up for in terms of slick, singular purpose — and with a foot-tapping, booty-shaking soundtrack to boot. A much more tricked-out Blu-ray presentation is out there, but for those on a budget or with an eye more angled toward eventual rental, “Rio” comes to DVD on a single disc presented in 2.40:1 anamorphic widescreen, preserving the aspect ratio of its original theatrical presentation, with a robust 5.1 Dolby digital surround sound audio mix, and additional Spanish and French Dolby surround mixes as well. Bonus features include a nine-minute “Jukebox” collection of the movie’s musical numbers, a single deleted scene in rough animated form, and two short music videos, each of which run under two minutes. Plan accordingly if you’re expecting repeated viewings and/or supplemental material diversionary enjoyment for the family.



Direct-to-DVD sequels have made Hollywood studios (mostly Sony and Disney) a mint, but the movies typically conform to certain cookie-cutter templates, and occupy the same emotional terrain as the films that spawned them. “Marley & Me,” a big holiday hit in 2008 starring Jennifer Aniston and Owen Wilson, was definitely a dog movie, but the destructive pooch was a filter or rubric through which the lives and relationship of Aniston and Wilson’s characters were assayed. “Marley & Me: The Puppy Years,” meanwhile, is (perhaps predictably) an inferior sequel in just about every imaginable way, but also merely a sub-“Beethoven”-style showcase for tongue-lolling professional pooches, plus a word-study credit for erstwhile actor and crooner Michael Damian (remember “Was It Nothing At All,” anyone?), now a budding auteur who helms movies like this and co-writes them with a woman that one presumes is his wife. Aniston and Wilson are gone, of course, and with them any sense of lively charm. They’re replaced by people with names like Travis Turner and Donnelly Rhodes, and plenty of dogs, of course. Oh, and Grayson Russell as the voice of Marley. Because, yes, this time he speaks. Sigh... of course.

The story centers around a neighborhood dog contest, and is as thinly sketched and roundly obvious as one might expect, stretched threadbare at even 86 minutes. Animals talking in and of themselves do not make for entertainment, if one assumes an audience has seen such a “trick” before. The makers of this tossed-off sequel made no such assumption, it seems. They took the road most frequently traveled, and it’s a bumpy and boring one. Housed in a red plastic Amaray case (to presumably give it some extra shelf appeal, and match the poster color of its predecessor), “The Puppy Years” comes to DVD presented in 1.78:1 anamorphic widescreen, with a Dolby digital 5.1 surround sound audio track. Bonus features include a featurette on the dog training involved in the film, plus cast members’ favorite moments from filming. As for video footage of Aniston or Wilson’s reaction to discovering this movie actually exists... well, that will have to exist only in one’s imagination, alas.



Another film that may on the surface seem for kids, meanwhile, is writer-director Dustin Mills' "The Puppet Monster Massacre." Actually, strike that. If one considers the cover art or title, things are pretty apparent — this is no kid's flick. Of course, if one just hears the logline of "puppet horror spoof," well... I suppose a mistake could be made. With its foul-mouthed puppets, "Avenue Q" was all the rage on Broadway a couple years ago, but this low-budget flick — a wild and raucous if somewhat forced love letter to monster movies and haunted house flicks of the 1980s, with more than a pinch of "South Park"ian attitude thrown into the mix — lacks a codifying cleverness to pull an audience past the goofy shock value of animation-enhanced puppet sex and gore.

The story centers on Charley Hawkins, a wallflower kid who receives a mailed invitation challenging him, along with others, to spend the night in Dr. Wolfgang Wagner's creepy mansion on the edge of town. The "winner" of the event is promised \$1 million, but the participants know not that Wagner has concocted a monster in his basement, and plans to feed all his visitors to it. Mills deserves points for effort and imagination, certainly, but far too much of the movie's voice casting is flat, and jokes at the expense of Ava Gardner and Adolf Hitler come across as forced. Problematic lighting, too, gives the movie an unappealing sheen, one that its wacky conceit cannot triumph over. Housed in a regular, white plastic Amaray case with a deep-set spindle disc-holder, the DVD comes on a region-free disc, and is presented in 1.33:1 full screen.



In great news for Blu-ray enthusiasts and comedy fans in general, two indisputable gems from director John Landis hit the format recently, in the form of “The Blues Brothers” and “Animal House.” Long before I could afford a cassette tape myself, the former, with Dan Aykroyd and John Belushi’s mesmerizing dance routines, taught me everything about soul music and, much to the chagrin of my eventual driver’s ed instructor, lead-foot get-away driving. The latter, meanwhile, educated myself and countless others on history (“Was it over when the Germans bombed Pearl Harbor?!”), as well as the proper etiquette for eating mashed potatoes in mixed company. In all seriousness, while the films themselves are much cherished, and rightfully so, it’s additionally heartening to see them get proper, solidly transferred Blu-ray releases, with bonus material ported over from previous DVD special editions. “The Blues Brothers” includes both the theatrical and extended versions of the movie (the extra 15 minutes of which may offer up surprises to viewers raised on television viewings of the film), a nice making-of featurette, a glimpse at the many spin-offs inspired by the movie (let’s not talk about the sequel... ugh), and a featurette focusing exclusively on Belushi. “Animal House,” meanwhile, includes a “Scene It?” game, an original documentary featuring interviews and behind-the-scenes footage with cast and crew, and a “Where Are They Now?” mockumentary from the “Double Secret Probation” DVD edition of the movie. Both Blu-rays also include BD Live and the Pocket Blu App, in which viewers can use their smartphone or tablet to control Blu-ray features, stream content and more. We’re one step closer to eliminating multiple remote controls, and that’s certainly not a bad thing!

“Clash,” meanwhile, provides Vietnamese-Americans with the chance to see themselves front and center in an action movie, instead of standing behind Vin Diesel and Paul Walker in the background. When Trinh (Veronica Ngo) has her daughter kidnapped, she’s forced to do anything she can to recover a stolen hard drive with some important satellite codes. She enlists the assistance of the mysterious Quan (Johnny Tri Nguyen, who also serves as the movie’s action choreographer and director), who harbors his own secrets, and reason for revenge. Romance and head-cracking then ensue, though not necessarily in that order. The plot is of course fairly boilerplate, but Dominic Pereira’s cinematography pops, and “Clash” has the benefit of the talented Nguyen, who doesn’t fool around in his enthralling hand-to-hand fight sequences. The movie arrives to DVD in a standard plastic Amaray case in turn stored in a complementary cardboard slipcover, in 2.35:1 anamorphic widescreen, and with

Vietnamese 5.1 Dolby digital and English stereo audio tracks, plus optional English subtitles, obviously. Special features include the requisite chapter stops, the movie's trailer, an aching inessential music video, a fight scene featurette and a conversation with the two leads.



“Wrong Side of the Bus,” from director Rod Freedman, is an intriguing and kind of artfully streamlined documentary about forgiveness and healing — the sort of which takes place in concert with others, but also within oneself. In the hour-long film, Sidney Bloch, an internationally recognized professor of psychiatry from Australia, makes a decision to return to Cape Town, South Africa for his medical school reunion. Having suffered from a troubled conscience for decades over his collusion — however real or imagined — with apartheid, Bloch takes his young adult son Aaron along with him on his quest for reconciliation, and finds their relationship irrevocably impacted by the trip as well.

Freedman’s movie is thought-provoking without being needlessly, self-aggrandizingly provocative. It locates the universal in the personal (and vice versa) without re-tilling Earth in a repetitive fashion. The younger Bloch actually narrates “Wrong Side of the Bus,” and is initially quite critical of his father’s journey, finding it self-serving. This is a smart choice by Freedman, as it gives the film an anchoring presence and perspective removed from its subject proper, and one unburdened — at least in the firsthand sense — by the issues with which Bloch is struggling, which essentially amount to having done and said nothing in the face of evil and injustice. Housed in a regular plastic Amaray case, “Wrong Side of the Bus” further benefits from a robust slate of complementary material, including a study guide and eight deleted scenes that run roughly 30 minutes. There is also a 14-minute interview with Freedman, conducted by editor Joanne Levitan, in which he talks about eschewing a formal filmmaking style in order to match Bloch’s personality, and first being contacted about the project by Bloch after the professor saw his movie “Uncle Chatzkel,” a somewhat thematically similar travelogue of familial history and import.



Another recent documentary that tackles a social issue (sort of) is “Hempsters: Plant the Seed,” about the fight not for legalized marijuana, but industrial grade hemp, which is actually used in over two dozen industrialized nations (including our neighbor to the north), and widely known to have numerous environmental advantages, but still banned here in the United States. Director Michael Henning’s film takes as its crusading subjects a collection of activists — including Woody Harrelson, Ralph Nader and others — and builds a fairly persuasive case for both hemp being entirely different from recreational marijuana (they’re plants of the same family, but have vastly different levels of THC, and other important differences) and a crop with real value and benefits. It does all this almost in spite of itself, however, as it’s assembled in a jumbled-together manner that does its narrative clarity of focus or overall mission statement much good.

Instead, it’s the straight information and agricultural science that tend to win out, bolstered by an understanding of the vested interest that petro-chemical companies and mono-culture corporate farms have in stamping out the ability of independent growers to work this durable multi-purpose crop, and serve it to various industries. More than anything, moneyed interests typically abhor an even playing field; they want to stay on top. “Hempsters” shuffles fitfully to and fro and could use an independent eye in the editing room, but there’s a stamp of swaggering personality on the film (Willie Nelson and especially Gatewood Galbraith, an independent candidate for Kentucky’s gubernatorial office, assure if of that) that makes sure it’s neither some staid policy-advocacy flick, nor a stoned bong-lover’s protest tract. Housed in a regular plastic Amaray case, “Hempsters” comes to DVD on a region-free disc. Supplementary features include seven minutes of movie clips highlighting reasons for hemp legalization, a two-and-a-half-minute alternate introduction, a collection of trailers, and an extended scene featuring activist Craig Lee. For more information, visit www.hempstersthemovie.com.

Written by: Brent Simon



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