

Beatles Stories ★★★1/2
(2012) 85 min. DVD: \$19.95.
Cinema Libre Studio (avail.
from most distributors).



Eight years ago, Long Island songwriter-turned-filmmaker Seth Swirsky set out to interview people who encountered the Beatles (individually or collectively). This utterly delightful documentary is comprised of short recollections, the majority conducted in person, although some are by phone, and a handful stem from meetings that transpired after the band broke up. Regardless of circumstance and context, nearly everyone recalls their Beatles experience with the kind of joy, reverence, and awe generally reserved for living deities. Singer-songwriter Jackie DeShannon, an opening act on the band's first U.S. tour, talks about playing Monopoly with George Harrison, while Justin Hayward of the Moody Blues recalls having to teach George the chords to "I'm Only Sleeping," a track from *Revolver*. Beach Boy Brian Wilson remembers Paul McCartney playing "She's Leaving Home" before it was recorded for *Sgt. Pepper*. Oscar-winning actor Ben Kingsley describes writing and performing songs for a musical directed by Beatles manager Brian Epstein, and then meeting John Lennon and Ringo Starr after the show, while former football star/broadcaster Frank Gifford recollects an encounter between Lennon and Ronald Reagan in the *Monday Night Football* booth. Not all of the reminiscences come from celebrities; others include the equipment manager for the Minnesota Twins, who received an autographed baseball when the Fab Four performed at Minneapolis' Metropolitan Stadium; Nancy Andrews, a former Starr girlfriend, who relates how he proposed to her in a Beverly Hills jewelry store (that union didn't happen); and an astronomer who got a letter from Ringo, thanking him for naming an asteroid after the drummer. While there is no original Beatles music heard, there are many heretofore unseen photos and video—including a brief clip of John delivering a very Lennon-esque weather report on a Philadelphia TV station in the 1970s. A must-see for Fab fans, this is highly recommended. Aud: P. (S. Graham)

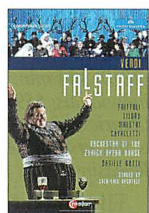
Don Quichotte ★★★1/2
(2010) 115 min. In French
w/English subtitles. DVD:
\$24.99. Naive (dist. by Naxos
of America).



Although not the last of Jules Massenet's operas—he would compose three more before his death in 1912—his 1910 take on Cervantes' famous elderly knight-errant has a valedictory feel, accentuated in this superb 2010 production from Brussels' Opera de la Monnaie by the presence of Brussels' native son José Van Dam. The libretto is simple:

Quichotte falls for the beautiful Dulcinea and determines to prove his love for her by retrieving a necklace stolen by a band of brigands. Instead, Quichotte is captured by the thieves, although his nobility so moves the rogues that they return the necklace. But while Dulcinea is happy to recover her missing jewelry, she spurns Quichotte, and he dies broken-hearted. The rich score is gorgeously performed by the company orchestra under Marc Minkowski. Septuagenarian Van Dam can no longer manage the lowest baritone register, but he remains an extremely stylish, affecting performer, while Silvia Tro Santafé is a resplendent Dulcinea (both visually and vocally), and Werner Van Mechelen is a gruffly humorous Sancho Panza. Although the costumes are an odd mix—gorgeous gowns for Dulcinea, a tattered topcoat for Quichotte, and glitzy toreador garb and black tuxedos (sometimes topped by horse-head masks!) for male choristers—the lavish sets are a distinct plus. Presented in Dolby Digital stereo, DVD extras include a "making-of" documentary. A striking production of a relatively rare opera, this is highly recommended. (F. Swietek)

Falstaff ★★★1/2
(2011) 126 min. In Italian w/
English subtitles. DVD: \$29.99,
Blu-ray: \$39.99. Unital Classica
(dist. by Naxos of America).



Giuseppe Verdi's 1893 last opera, a brilliant adaptation of Shakespeare (primarily *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, with additions from *Henry IV*), is splendidly performed in this 2011 Zurich Opera production. Although the setting is not the 15th century, the staging is very attractive—with simple interiors that give way to a courtyard and then to the woodland where Falstaff is humiliated by the women he has tried to seduce—while the costumes (mixing period garb with modern dress) are colorful. Ambrogio Maestri is excellent in the title role, looking the part while singing and acting with gusto. Massimo Cavalletti is almost as fine as Ford, the blustering husband whom Falstaff unsuccessfully attempts to make a cuckold, and Barbara Frittoli brings a lovely soprano to the part of Mrs. Ford, her voice blending nicely with those of the other chattering females, including Yvonne Naef's amusing Mrs. Quickly. The vibrant score—one of Verdi's most complex, if not his most melodious—is played with precision and richness by the company orchestra under Daniele Gatti, whose tempos never seem rushed. Presented in DTS 5.0 (DTS-HD 5.0 on the Blu-ray edition) and PCM stereo, this mounting of Verdi's final masterwork joins the Glyndebourne production (VL-7/10) as one of the best recent versions released. Highly recommended. (F. Swietek)

From the Back of the Room ★★★1/2
(2011) 104 min. DVD: \$99.95.
Music Video Distributors (avail.
from most distributors). PPR.



From the Back of the Room looks at the contemporary American punk scene from an exclusively female perspective. Director Amy Oden travels across the country, speaking with women who've joined or formed groups, like Tribe 8, Blatz, and 2 Minute Tantrum. Some of the subjects prefer to make music with other women, while others don't have a preference. Several cite the riot grrrl movement as an inspiration, and Oden interviews Kathleen Hanna of Bikini Kill and Allison Wolfe of Bratmobile, as well as roadies, promoters, disc jockeys, club managers, and graphic artists. Old and new concert footage brings the high-energy music to life, while hand-drawn fanzines, posters, and record covers emphasize the D.I.Y. nature of the acts. Although Oden divides the film into chapters—like "Making Space" and "Motherhood"—the format is more free-form as speakers relate their experiences both as feminists and musicians. Oddly, the documentary makes no mention of punk pioneers, such as Patti Smith or Penelope Houston (still on the road with the Avengers), a bit of a disappointment since even a quick overview of 1970s punk would have added greater historical context to this somewhat scattershot documentary. A strong optional purchase. Aud: C, P. (K. Fennesy)

Il Trittico ★★★1/2
(2011) 180 min. In Italian
w/English subtitles. DVD: 3
discs, \$29.99; Blu-ray: \$29.99.
Opus Arte (dist. by Naxos of
America).



This 2011 Royal Opera production of Giacomo Puccini's 1918 triptych of one-act operas is—in a word—masterful. The opening work, *Il Tabarro*, is a grim *verismo* tragedy of the vengeance a barge master takes on his unfaithful wife and her lover. The second, *Suor Angelica*, is a tender tale of a nun who commits suicide after she learns of the death of the illegitimate child she abandoned when her family forced her to enter the convent. And the third, *Gianni Schicchi*, is a rambunctious ensemble farce about a rogue who bamboozles a bunch of greedy relatives out of their expected inheritances. Each is conducted unerringly by company musical director Antonio Pappano, who displays remarkable sensitivity to the very different moods, while the orchestra responds richly. The vocalism is also exceptional, with Lucio Gallo exhibiting his versatility as both Michele, the vengeful husband in *Tabarro*, and as the scheming Schicchi; Eva-Maria Westbroek outstanding as Michele's wife, Giorgetta; and Ermonela Jahò a resplendent