

Mariachi Vargas competitions against larger institutions with multiple directors, and here they travel to Austin, and to San Antonio to perform at the state capitol. Since it's a traditional musical form, band members need to look the part, so Marina Flores, whose hair color fluctuates throughout filming, sprays her hair black before competing. While most documentaries would end after the big competition, *Mariachi High* continues to the end of the year as the seniors prepare for the next stage in their lives, grateful for the head start that Padilla's music program has provided them. Recommended. Aud: H, C, P. (K. Fennessy)

The Perils of Show Business: Proceed at Your Own Risk ★★

(2012) 60 min. DVD: \$19.99. *Limelight Editions* (avail. from www.limelighteditions.com). PPR. ISBN: 978-0-87910-398-9.

For almost five decades actor Charles Grodin has entertained audiences on stage, TV, radio, and particularly in films such as *Midnight Run*, the original *The Heartbreak Kid*, and the popular *Beethoven* dog series. According to Grodin, acting is simple. But how many actors can make a living at it? In this curious program, Grodin faces the camera, while offering opinions, advice, and memories about the thespian profession. Ranging across topics related to acting, writing, and directing, Grodin delivers pithy remarks and one liners, such as recalling that early in his career he lived in a fleabag apartment, which has "since been upgraded to a homeless shelter." Grodin says that all actors must learn to deal with rejection, but while he provides tips on handling critical or unsupportive directors,

he also carries a chip on his shoulder—calling renowned actress and drama coach Uta Hagen a "bully," and offering similar put-downs of director-choreographer Jerome Robbins and Roman Polanski (who gave Grodin a small part in *Rosemary's Baby*). In between segments, the program flashes effusive quotes regarding Grodin's performances and charitable activities. Unfortunately, *The Perils of Show Business* is a meandering effort that doesn't offer starving actors really helpful advice or encouragement, and much of it lacks the generous spirit usually associated with Grodin. Not recommended. Aud: C, P. (S. Rees)

Play in the Gray ★★

(2012) 85 min. DVD: \$14.95. *Music Video Distributors* (avail. from most distributors).

The idea of men in drag can easily conjure up memories of wild classic comedy gems, running the gamut from the frothy vaudeville shtick of Milton Berle to the boundary-pushing underground nihilism of Divine. But on the distaff side, there are relatively few culturally significant entertainment milestones featuring women dressed in male drag. Kaitlin Meelia's documentary focuses on the Boston-based all-female theatrical troupe All the Kings Men, which specializes in offering a "drag king" alternative to the more prevalent drag queen style of comedy. Meelia gives equal attention to each performer, with in-depth interviews focusing on personal histories and performance styles, eliciting interesting opinions on gender identity in both standup comedy and in the wider society. Unfortunately, the insights and energy evident during the in-

Nina Conti: Her Master's Voice ★★★1/2

(2012) 60 min. DVD: \$19.99. *Virgil Films* (avail. from most distributors).

Although the lines between mockumentary, performance art, and confessional essay are hard to decipher in this enormously entertaining film, it's sure fun watching the boundaries blur as British actress-director Nina Conti, a YouTube sensation often credited for reinventing the art of ventriloquism, goes on a long pilgrimage—both to sort out ambivalent feelings about her career and to bequeath several puppets to a retirement home somewhere in Kentucky. Conti (daughter of actor Tom Conti) attends an annual ventriloquist convention with her trademark hand puppet—the somber and plainspoken Monkey—and several large latex-and-wood creations left to her by her late mentor and lover, Ken Campbell, an influential maverick actor and director on the experimental-theater scene in London. Throughout her trip, Conti uses private interactions with Monkey and the other puppets (one of whom resembles Campbell) to confront ghosts from her past as well as uncertainty about whether she should have remained in ventriloquism after Campbell nudged her in that direction. These conversations are often very funny and tender (one of the puppets, an old woman whom Campbell had used as a Gertrude Stein figure, requires a lot of care), but they can also be unnerving (especially when the Campbell-like figure asks Conti about a long-ago abortion). Conti's stage act crosses over into mind-bending unreality—a dynamic that extends to this film, as the viewer is not sure what's genuine and what's not (but it's all intriguing). DVD extras include audio commentary by Conti and Monkey, extended scenes, and Conti's convention stage performance. Highly recommended. Aud: C, P. (T. Keogh)



Choices

AWARD WINNING DOCUMENTARIES



The SON of the OLIVE MERCHANT
In Search of the Armenian Genocide



The Son of the Olive Merchant
Cat# CH7065DVD - \$24.95



Minarets in Temecula
Islam and the Right to Religious Freedom



Minarets in Temecula
Cat# CH7066DVD - \$24.95

Freedom Flyers of TUSKEGEE



Freedom Flyers of Tuskegee
Cat# CH7063DVD - \$24.95

www.choicesvideo.net

dividual profiles evaporate when the women come together for their shows; indeed, the onstage comedy selections presented here come across as a second-rate riff on *Saturday Night Live* sketches. Ultimately, the broadly vulgar and fairly predictable nature of the troupe's comedy reminds us that it doesn't matter who is wearing what clothing—if the jokes aren't funny, the whole thing won't work. An optional purchase. Aud: C, P. (P. Hall)

School Play ★★★

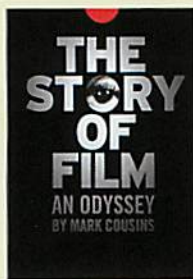
(2010) 72 min. DVD: \$99. Stenhouse Publishers. PPR. ISBN: 978-1-57110-960-6.

School Play follows five suburban New York fifth-graders during auditions, rehearsals, and an eventual performance of a staged version of *The Wizard of Oz*. The kids run the gamut of behavioral types: an admitted class clown; an outcast who struggles to make friends; a popular, competitive girl; a boy who stutters but loves to be the center of attention; and the savvy youngest child in a family of stage performers. The director and school principal talk about the importance of the annual play, and parents are seen in roles extending beyond helping the children to learn lines—talking about their own work with their offspring, while one father draws a parallel for his son between working on *Oz* and doing anything well in life. Filmmakers Rick Velleu and Eddie Rosenstein fall short in a few areas: the film jumps from one participant's discouragement to elation without showing any connection; the overuse of atmospheric shots and folk music slow the momentum; and, disappointingly, the students' journey ends with excerpts of the performance shown in only a brief montage, as the soundtrack gives way almost entirely to Cat Stevens. But *School Play* is still an effective reminder of the power of childhood experiences. DVD extras include a viewing guide with related video clips. Recommended, overall. Aud: I, C, P. (M. Puffer-Rothenberg)

Tales from a Ghetto Klown ★★★

(2012) 60 min. DVD: \$24.99 (\$54.95 w/PPR). PBS Video. Closed captioned. ISBN: 978-1-60883-731-1.

According to actor John Leguizamo, "theater is the extreme sport" of acting. Although Leguizamo is familiar to moviegoers from his work in films (such as *Carlito's Way* and *Executive Decision*), he has also written and starred in five one-man shows, including *Mambo Mouth* and *Spic-O-Rama*. His latest, *Ghetto Klown*, chronicles the "journey of an artist," depicting the joy and pain of discovering what it means to be a Latin actor in America. Ben DeJesus directs this PBS special on how *Ghetto Klown* was conceived, rehearsed, and refined during the long tryout process, taking the actor



The Story of Film: An Odyssey ★★★★★

(2011) 5 discs. 915 min. DVD: \$69.95. Music Box Films (avail. from most distributors).

Irish critic and filmmaker Mark Cousins offers a master class in cinema history in this superb eight-part series originally presented on Britain's More4 television. Running over 15 hours, *The Story of Film*—narrated by Cousins—serves up an incredibly comprehensive, wonderfully evocative survey of the medium's first century-plus. The approach here is basically chronological, beginning with Edison in America and the Lumière brothers in France and continuing up through the digital age in the 2000s.

Featuring literally hundreds of illustrative clips (from William K.L. Dickson's 1894 *Anabelle Butterfly Dance* to Christopher Nolan's 2010 *Inception*), the series also interviews a wide array of filmmakers, including Wim Wenders, Lars von Trier, Gus Van Sant, Jane Campion, and John Sayles. Cousins delivers an imaginative, highly personal treatment of a great art form in which several major themes emerge, ranging from the centrality of the director (essentially the auteur theory) to the global character of film. While Cousins doesn't neglect Hollywood or Europe, impressive coverage is given to the rest of the filmmaking world—China, Japan, Korea, Russia, India, the Middle East, Africa, South and Latin America—with segments also focusing on various genres, like Japanese horror and Hong Kong martial arts movies. Cousins also encourages an appreciation of cinematic technique, often juxtaposing scenes from disparate eras and locales to illustrate the influence of one filmmaker on another, and to emphasize innovation—narrative as well as technical—in the medium's development. One of the chief joys of this series is that while it is educational and entertaining, it will also inevitably invite discussion and debate. Bundled with a 44-page booklet, *The Story of Film* is a brilliant achievement. Highly recommended. Editor's Choice. Aud: C, P. (F. Swietek)

from California to an out-of-town opening during a Chicago blizzard, and finally to Broadway. Of course, even a one-man show requires collaborators, such as director and fellow actor Fisher Stevens, as well as a choreographer, and sound, set, and costume designers. Leguizamo describes comedy as an antidote to his often tough childhood, although a big challenge lies in getting the tone right, scaling back on the anger, and emphasizing instead hope and survival. After a fairly successful Broadway opening, the actor is challenged to take the show to his hometown of Bogotá, Colombia, performing it in Spanish (even though he is not fluent). Rosie Perez and others describe Leguizamo as part of a new breed of Latin actors helping to bring ethnic and working-class audiences to Broadway. DVD extras include bonus scenes. Recommended. Aud: C, P. (S. Rees)

HISTORY & CURRENT EVENTS

9/11: Day That Changed the World

★★★★1/2

(2012) 136 min. DVD: \$19.98. Inception Media Group (avail. from most distributors). Closed captioned.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks have been called the 102 minutes that changed both America and the world. Narrated by Martin Sheen, this Smithsonian Channel documentary presents a 10th anniversary "inside" look at the nation's confusion, uncertainty, and

fear, followed by the determination and resolve to identify and punish the attackers. Filmmaker Leslie Woodhead's *9/11: Day That Changed the World* begins with rare footage of President Bush jogging early in the morning of that clear-skied, beautiful but terrible day, before dropping in on an elementary school class in Florida. As word of the attacks spread, the decision had to be made about a possible shoot-down order that could kill innocent civilians on the planes (an official recalls that it was "like living in a Tom Clancy novel"). After grounding all civilian aircraft, a frantic attempt was made to secure key government officials, particularly the President, who had to be protected, but also seen to be in charge. The documentary features interviews with Mayor Rudy Giuliani, Vice President Dick Cheney, Laura Bush, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and a number of first responders, who recall nightmare images of victims leaping from upper floors at the World Trade towers, frustration at not being able to find or help survivors after the buildings collapsed, and post-disaster efforts to regain control and prevent another possible wave of attacks. *9/11* also covers the formation of the "Bush doctrine" on retaliating against countries aiding terrorists, as well as the need for military and political leaders to adjust their thinking, which had changed little since the end of the Cold War. DVD extras include the bonus program *9/11: Stories in Fragments*. One of the best 9/11 anniversary documentaries, this powerful film is highly recommended. Aud: H, C, P. (S. Rees)