



# QUEUED UP

BY BRYAN REESMAN

## BIRDMAN (OR THE UNEXPECTED VIRTUE OF IGNORANCE) (2014)



**The buildup:** Former superhero movie star Riggan Thomson (Michael Keaton) desperately seeks to stage an artistic comeback on Broadway with a show he is directing and adapting from a Raymond Carver novel. But he must overcome conflicts with many people: his producer (Zach Galifianakis), arrogant new co-star (Edward Norton), female co-stars (Andrea Riseborough and Naomi Watts), a self-righteous critic (Lindsay Duncan), his fresh from rehab daughter (Emma Stone), and his ex-wife (Amy Ryan). He also battles with an inner

monologue from his famous alter ego Birdman, who wants him to abandon his theater pretensions to suit up again and relive their glory days.

**The breakdown:** This year's Oscar winner for Best Picture, Director, Original Screenplay, and Cinematography is a tour de force from the entire ensemble. Shot in long takes with one camera, *Birdman* whisks us around the backstage drama of a dysfunctional production that must be a hit for everyone involved. But it also looks at the price of fame and the long

shadows that can be cast by one milestone in an artist's career that everything else must be measured by. It's fitting that Keaton stars in the film considering Birdman looks and sounds rather like Batman, the role that has been the commercial high point of his career. Luckily Keaton has done better than Thomson, primarily in the world of animated films; of course, this movie has rejuvenated his public image.

## THE CAPTIVE (2014)



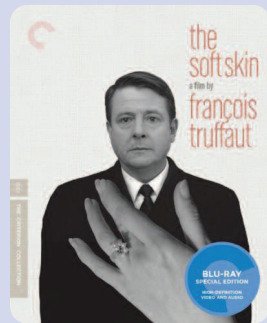
**The buildup:** After a young girl's disappearance, her estranged parents (Ryan Reynolds and Mirelle Enos) hold out hope that she will be found as two cops (Rosario Dawson and Scott Speedman) continue pursuing the case. Meanwhile, their daughter's captor (the creepy Kevin Durand) uses her to lure young girls to a pedophile ring while also letting her see her mother through closet circuit monitoring at her hotel job. But as the police and the father get closer to the truth, danger

mounts for them all.

**The breakdown:** Atom Egoyan has written and directed some excellent indie films in the past (*Exotica*, *Speaking Parts*, and *Ararat* among them), and he brings his strong sense of character into this more traditional drama, which twists and turns thanks to the jumps back and forth in the narrative timeline. This is not a whodunit—we already know at the start who the key players are—but a story which, despite its plot holes,

does create a good sense of anxiety and frustration. The subtle manipulations of the kidnapper add an extra layer of creepiness and hint at the screwed up psychological fetishes that many such individuals likely harbor.

## THE SOFT SKIN (1964)



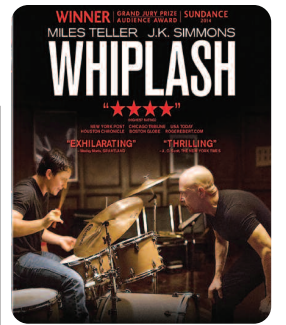
**The buildup:** A successful author and magazine editor (Jean Desailly) with a seemingly happy home life with a wife (Nelly Benedetti) and young daughter begins having romantic trysts with a beautiful young airline stewardess (Françoise Dorléac). What starts as a blissful affair devolves into a tragic love story with worse consequences than either of them could have imagined.

**The breakdown:** By this time, director Francois Truffaut had

begun showing his Hitchcock influences, and he created tension early in *The Soft Skin* to foreshadow the melodrama to come. In some ways, the film is not much different from many dramas of the time, but it stands out because of its characterizations and the depiction of infidelity which has a more sexual tone than an American film of the time would have had. In a vintage interview included in the set, Truffaut acknowledges his distaste for the main character and his

decisions, but he still found a way to tell a sad, compelling story of love gone astray. Ironically, the director had an affair with the same woman of desire from his film, which helped end his marriage.

## WHIPLASH (2014)



**The buildup:** Cocky college jazz drummer Andrew Nieman (Miles Teller), obsessed with being the next Buddy Rich, is enlisted for his school's award-winning jazz ensemble by its arrogant, abusive leader Terence Fletcher (J.K. Simmons). The ensuing clash of wills pushes him to the brink both physically and mentally and makes him question his intentions. The story is inspired by writer-director Damien Chazelle's experiences while playing in the Princeton High School Studio Band.

**The breakdown:** While many critics have argued over the realism of this over-the-top music school drama, there is no denying the emotions it stirs up as pupil and professor battle for dominance. In Andrew's desire to prove his mentor wrong he plays into the psychological warfare, which leads to intense showdowns. Some people have argued that the film casts jazz music and education in a bad light. I would counter that by making a tense yet exhilarating experience, the filmmakers will make people more interested in the genre

(this writer included). To that end, the Blu-ray includes the 42-minute documentary *Timekeepers* featuring real-life drummers like Chad Smith, Kenny Aronoff, and Gina Schock of the Go-Go's discussing their musical origins and passion for their craft.

## MARK OF THE DEVIL (1970)



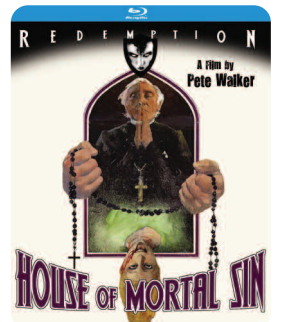
**The buildup:** Meet the new witch hunter, same as the old witch hunter. An Austrian village circa the 1700s that is being terrorized by a corrupt and salacious witch hunter gets overtaken by a higher authority in Lord Cumberland (Herbert Lom) and his young apprentice (Udo Kier), who seek to extract proper confessions, even if done by painful methods of torture. Amid the ensuing power struggle, a beautiful young woman and other innocent townspeople become falsely accused and imprisoned for witchcraft, leading to growing discord in the village.

**The breakdown:** For its day, *Mark Of The Devil* was a crazy, controversial movie given the excess torture, blood, and death that was portrayed. It was allegedly banned in a few countries. Yet it still holds some power today with its blend of exploitation movie aesthetics and social commentary. A dashing young Udo Kier is rather stoic for the role of doubting acolyte and romantic lead, but Herbert Lom—most famous as bumbling Inspector Clouseau's long-suffering police commissioner in the *Pink Panther* series—lends gravitas to his role as usurping witch hunter. *Mark Of The Devil* has

some flaws, and its castle storming finale is rather abrupt, but it certainly drives home the point of how brutal religious fanaticism could get back then. The Blu-ray comes loaded with a wealth of bonus material including cast interviews that will satisfy fans of this well-known B-movie.

## RETRO VIEW: A First Look At Older Video Releases

### HOUSE OF MORTAL SIN (1975)



**The buildup:** A local priest named Father Xavier Meldrum (Anthony Sharp) becomes obsessed with a young woman named Jenny Welch (Susan Penhaligon) and her sexual confessions, then proceeds to secretly dispatch people around her whom he feels have committed moral transgressions. But can she and her friends, including another priest serving under Meldrum, uncover his devilish handiwork before he comes for them?

**The breakdown:** Director Pete Walker made many dark cult movies (including *Schizo* and *The Comeback*), and this is one of his most memorable, combining elements of a slasher film with a socially conscious drama focusing on the hypocrisy of religious zealots. Walker himself might not have taken the story so seriously, but when you have an actor like Sharp in your film—he played the duplicitous politician promoting the Ludovico Technique in *A Clockwork Orange*—he elevates

the material. Add in Stephanie Beacham (*The Nightcomers*, *Troop Beverly Hills*) as Jenny's sister, Walker regular Sheila Keith as the creepy caretaker to Meldrum's invalid mother, and a dark ending, and you've got a good recipe for a solid cult flick.