

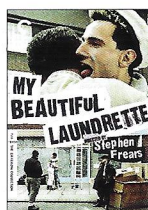
as the population leaves in search of work. While the easygoing Chet eventually leaves cow-punching to run a hardware store, Monte is an independent who loves the freedom of the range ("I don't want to do anything I can't do from my horse."). Marvin and Palance share a warm and convincing camaraderie, while Jeanne Moreau is lovely as the worldly bargirl at the end of her own career. *Monte Walsh* is an "end of the West" Western that explores the changing culture with a melancholy beauty (capturing the empty plains and abandoned towns) and a sense of loss, but also an appreciation for the roughhousing, drinking, and practical joking of the society of ranch hands living and working together for the moment. And when Monte's fellow cowhands turn to crime, it's not the mercenary savagery of *The Wild Bunch*, but merely a matter of desperation. Making its Blu-ray debut, this is recommended. (S. Axmaker)

My Beautiful Laundrette

★★★1/2

Criterion, 98 min., R, DVD: \$29.95, Blu-ray: \$39.95

Nearly 15 years after his first feature film *Gumshoe* and more than a decade of directing plays for British TV, director Stephen Frears made his breakthrough with 1985's *My Beautiful Laundrette*, featuring an Oscar-nominated screenplay written by playwright Hanif Kureishi. Omar (Gordon Warnecke), son of a Pakistani immigrant in London, who takes over the management of a failing laundrette owned by his entrepreneurial uncle (Saeed Jaffrey) in a seedy neighborhood, is a total outsider. Although born and raised in Britain, Omar is still seen as an immigrant by his white neighbors, plus he's gay, a secret that he keeps from his family. The film was also a breakout for Daniel Day-Lewis (who won awards from the National Society of Film Critics and the New York Film Critics Circle), playing a rough and tumble street-smart gay punk who turns his back on his racist buddies and resumes a relationship with his old school-chum/boy-friend Omar, a romance that is kept under wraps from their friends and families. *My Beautiful Laundrette* remains a provocative film, a grungy yet dynamic portrait of race and prejudice in the Thatcher-era London of East Indian immigrants and neo-Nazi gangs, but also a very human story about individuals struggling to find their identity and place in a complicated culture. Extras include new interviews (with the director, writer, and producers), and a booklet. Highly recommended. (S. Axmaker)

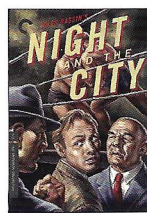


Night and the City

Criterion, 95 min., not rated, DVD: \$29.95, Blu-ray: \$39.95

Richard Widmark stars as a two-bit Ameri-

can con-man in London in one of the best Hollywood film noirs set in a foreign capital. Harry Fabian (Widmark) is a restless hustler at the bottom of the underworld food chain with a trail of failed get-rich-quick schemes, but still holding on to the naïve enthusiasm that this one "can't lose"—much to the dismay of his long-suffering girlfriend (Gene Tierney). Harry's latest scheme, however, pits him against London's wrestling kingpin (Herbert Lom) and he winds up using everyone within reach to put his precarious plan together. Shot for 20th Century Fox on location, this was director Jules Dassin's final American film before fleeing the Communist witch-hunt and decamping to Europe. In the classic film noir tradition, everyone is out for themselves (except for Tierney, the most angelic "nightclub hostess" you've ever seen, who is faithful beyond all reason), and the consequences for betraying powerful men are dire. Widmark is a man so desperate to be seen by others as a success, that he will lie, cheat, and steal to make that happen, serving up a quick smile that is a beautiful mix of sly arrogance and childlike joy. Dassin turns nocturnal London into a labyrinth when Harry's plan inevitably goes bad and he is forced to flee, scurrying through alleys and ducking into dives like a rat on the run, while desperately searching for a way out (the stark slashes of light and extreme camera angles are classic film noir images). Newly restored and remastered, extras include the alternate British version of the film, audio commentary by film scholar Glenn Erickson, archival interviews with Dassin, a comparison of music scores for the American and British releases, and a booklet. Highly recommended. (S. Axmaker)



Prime Cut

Kino Lorber, 88 min., R, Blu-ray: \$29.95

A calloused, gritty, underrated 1972 crime drama, *Prime Cut* stars Lee Marvin as tough, hard-bitten mob enforcer Nick Devlin, who is sent to Kansas City to collect from a crooked stockyard mogul and meat-packing mobster with the unusual name of Mary Ann. The name is unusual because Mary Ann is a man (Gene Hackman), a mercenary who is expanding his business into selling girls while thumbing his nose at the Chicago players who bankrolled his operation. "Animal flesh, human flesh, it's all the same," is Mary Ann's motto. Devlin is strictly business, a man without sentimentality, but he draws the line at Mary Ann's flesh-peddling enterprise with underage girls whom he treats like cattle. Michael Ritchie directs with a lean style and offbeat flourishes of gallows humor as he twists

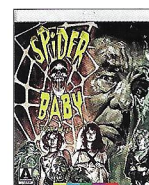


crime movie conventions: the mob gunman from the big bad city of Chicago is the white knight here and the heartland folk are as corrupt as in any urban cesspool. Ritchie also delivers inventive and memorable set pieces, including a shotgun battle in the midst of the oblivious patrons of a country fair, and a chase through a wheat field as Devlin and threatened girl Poppy (Sissy Spacek in her film debut) run hand in hand from a thresher. But underneath the gangster movie drama lies a brutal satire of American commerce as an amoral culture in which everything is for sale. Making its Blu-ray debut, this is recommended. (S. Axmaker)

Spider Baby

Arrow, 84 min., not rated, Blu-ray/DVD Combo: \$39.95

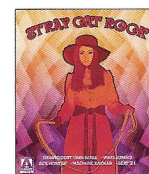
A great blast of 1960s B-movie inspiration, 1967's *Spider Baby* is the debut solo feature film from cult director Jack Hill, who had previously spent years reworking unfinished and imported films for Roger Corman. For his first original project, Hill wrote a horror comedy about a family cursed with Merrye Syndrome, a (fictional) malady that causes all the members of the Merrye family to regress mentally and emotionally with the onset of puberty. "The unfortunate result of... inbreeding," explains Bruno (Lon Chaney Jr. in a warm, paternal performance), who is the chauffeur and guardian of the afflicted offspring. The "children" (adult women Jill Banner and Beverly Washburn in schoolgirl frocks, and gangly Sid Haig as bald, infantile Ralph) slip into a state of childlike innocence and primal savagery. When distant cousins (closet dominatrix Carol Ohmart and affable, avuncular Quinn Redeker) arrive with a lawyer to contest an inheritance, all of these roiling drives are unleashed. *Spider Baby* is an inventive mix of *Psycho*, *Freaks*, and Freud (the sexual curiosity of the children is both inspired and unsettling) that is kinky, funny, and oddly sweet. Chaney called this one of his favorite roles and Hill slips in a number of *Wolfman* references in tribute. Presented in a Blu-ray/DVD Combo set, *Spider Baby* features a new HD transfer, along with numerous extras, including an audio commentary, cast and crew panel discussion, behind-the-scenes featurettes, interviews, Hill's 1960 student film "The Host," and a booklet. Recommended. (S. Axmaker)



Stray Cat Rock: The Collection

Arrow, 5 discs, 417 min., in Japanese w/English subtitles, not rated, Blu-ray: \$69.95

In 1970, the Japanese Nikkatsu Corporation decided to produce a series of outlaw biker movies modeled after the exploitation flicks that Roger Corman was



churning out for American audiences. Originally released in 1970-71, the five *Stray Cat Rock* movies were obviously made in a hurry, sharing a vivid '70s style and youth-oriented sensibility. Toshiya Fujita's *Wild Jumbo* is a heist movie in which a group of reckless teens unearth a cache of weapons and rob a religious group. Yasuharu Hasebe's *Delinquent Girl Boss* focuses on the tough female leader of a biker gang who becomes embroiled in a rigged boxing match. Hasebe also helmed *Sex Hunter*, which revolves around a war between female and male gangs, and *Machine Animal*, centering on female bikers who are trying to exonerate American soldiers being railroaded on drug charges. Lastly, Fujita's *Beat '71* (also known as *Crazy Riders '71*) serves up a weird riff on *Romeo and Juliet* with a Western subplot, in which a father tries to keep his son from associating with a jailed female biker. All of the films are schlock, but the goofy mixture of sex, violence, and music—coupled with the overwrought camerawork and editing—can be amusing. Bowing on Blu-ray, the *Stray Cat Rock* set features extras that include interviews with Hasebe, and actors Tatsuya Fuji (who appeared in all five films) and Yoshio Harada. A strong optional purchase. (F. Swietek)

The Sunshine Boys

★★★

Warner, 111 min., PG, Blu-ray: \$21.99

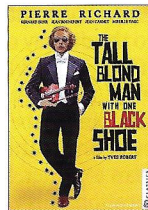


Movie adaptations of Neil Simon's plays have been a mixed bag, and even the best still feel stagebound, which is certainly the case with this 1975 film of Simon's Broadway smash, stiltedly directed by Herbert Ross. *The Sunshine Boys* centers on a legendary comedy team who split up acrimoniously more than a decade earlier but are invited to appear on a TV special to perform one of their old sketches. Much of the story follows the frantic efforts of the nephew (Richard Benjamin) of curmudgeon Willy Clark (Walter Matthau)—an older version of gruff Oscar Madison—to persuade Clark and his erstwhile partner, Al Lewis (George Burns), who is now living contentedly in the suburbs, to agree to work together again one last time. He does succeed, but the ancient animosity between the pair threatens to derail their performance. Burns is a delight—winning an Oscar here—but Matthau bellows overmuch, and his heavy old-age makeup is unconvincing. And the supposedly classic doctor skit the duo bring out of mothballs turns out to be a hoary vaudeville routine that is more likely to evoke groans than laughs. With all its flaws, however, *The Sunshine Boys* is a poignant as well as sporadically funny film about two old guys whose underlying affection is evident despite their rants, and it provides Burns the opportunity to give a master class in impeccable comic timing. Debuting on Blu-ray,

extras here include an audio commentary by Benjamin, a featurette about Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer with a substantial segment on the movie, a silent makeup test with Matthew and Jack Benny (who was originally signed to play Lewis but dropped out due to illness), and a screen test of Phil Silvers as Clark. Recommended. (F. Swietek)

The Tall Blond Man with One Black Shoe

★★★
Film Movement, 90 min., in French w/English subtitles, PG, DVD: \$24.95, Blu-ray: \$34.95



Pierre Richard rocketed from French comedy favorite to world-renowned farceur with this 1972 comedy about a concert violinist mistaken for an international spy. The premise borrows from Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*, with a government intelligence agency creating a fake agent to distract the enemy, but it's here given a cynical twist and comic treatment closer to the *Pink Panther* films. François (Richard) is a decoy, of course, but also an unwitting pawn that the head of the agency (Jean Rochefort) has no qualms about sacrificing in his struggle against an underling (Bernard Blier) who is plotting to take his position. Mireille Darc costars as a sexy agent sent to seduce secrets from the patsy. Klutz he may be, but François is also an amiable, innocent straight man in the eye of a spy movie hurricane, and director Yves Robert favors wonderful small scenes and wry commentary over slapstick zaniness. A clever film that was also popular with American audiences in its day, this was remade in the U.S. in 1985 with Tom Hanks as *The Man with One Red Shoe* (which has been rightfully forgotten). Making its high-def debut, this is recommended. (S. Axmaker)

The Thing with Two Heads

★★★
Olive, 91 min., PG, DVD: \$24.95, Blu-ray: \$29.95

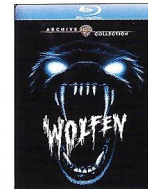


"They transplanted a white bigot's head on a soul brother's body!" reads the tagline for this 1972 cult oddity starring Ray Milland as racist doctor Maxwell Kirshner, suffering from a fatal condition, who plans to graft his own head onto another living body. After a successful experiment with a gorilla and a surreal chase with a two-headed ape (a guy in an ape suit, of course) running through suburbia, Kirshner goes into a coma and his protégé moves Kirshner's head onto a death row prisoner named Jack Moss (Rosey Grier), who also happens to be a black man. Although essentially an example of grindhouse '70s sci-fi cinema, a case might be made for the film's racial politics, as the white head—colonized on a black man—tries to claim ownership of that body even while the black head is still alive.

But that would be giving too much credit to a ridiculous flick that practically begs the audience to overlook its cheap effects (the dummy head of Milland looks like it's about to fall off during an extended dirt-bike chase, while the close-ups make it look like Milland is standing on tiptoe trying to peek over Grier's shoulder). When Jack shows up at his girlfriend's place with this unwanted passenger, she asks: "I was wondering... do you have two of anything else?" Yes, it's infamously bad, but that's why it's a cult film—perhaps the weirdest, silliest drive-in movie ever made about race relations. Optional. (S. Axmaker)

Wolfen

★★★
Warner, 114 min., R, Blu-ray: \$21.99



Adapted from the Whitley Strieber novel and directed by Michael Wadleigh, 1981's *Wolfen* is not a werewolf movie by strict definition, but it does delve into Native American lore involving shape-shifters and ancient animal spirits, as well as urban legends of wolves who hunt in the cities. Set in New York City during an era of urban renewal and radical American terrorists, the film begins with the bloody murders of a millionaire politician/developer and his wife. The authorities think that a terrorist organization is responsible but the investigation led by an unconventional homicide detective (Albert Finney) reveals a string of otherwise unrelated deaths sharing similar details, along with evidence that wolves are somehow involved—even though they are extinct in New York. Wadleigh uses evocative Steadicam POV shots of the wolves moving through the city, sensing the world through heat signature and scent (eerily similar to the video surveillance technology used by the FBI here). Diane Venora and Gregory Hines make their respective feature film debuts as fellow investigators, while Edward James Olmos is memorable as a Native American activist who guides Finney through the lore of his people. Overall, *Wolfen* is a smart entry in the man-versus-nature horror genre, featuring striking imagery, an evocative atmosphere, genuinely suspenseful thrills, and political, social, and cultural dimensions that are rarely seen in this kind of film. Bowing on Blu-ray, this is recommended. (S. Axmaker)

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