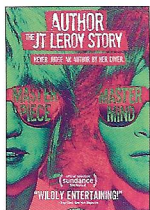


mix are homages to two giants of Argentine folk music, Mercedes Sosa and Atahualpa Yupanqui, both shown in extended archival footage, although the Sosa tribute is undermined by one of the film's few serious lapses of directorial judgment, as the clip is shown before a classroom of children at their desks, who react by either swaying to the beat or simply looking bored. Saura immerses viewers in the country's rich variety of folk music—and individually most of the numbers are pleasant—but the whole feels like less than the sum of its parts, as there is little examination of what is special or distinctive about the different styles. Still, Saura has a sizable following, so this should be considered a strong optional purchase. (F. Swietek)

Author: The JT LeRoy Story ★★1/2

Sony, 112 min., R, DVD: \$30.99



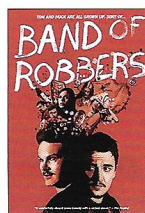
The case of JT LeRoy constitutes one of the greatest literary hoaxes of recent times. The author—supposedly an androgynous, HIV-positive teen who was abandoned in California by his mother, a West Virginia truck-stop prostitute—was embraced by publishers, critics, and celebrities alike, but he was actually the invention of Laura Albert, a San Francisco woman who wrote everything published under Leroy's name. Albert spoke in his voice in telephone interviews while orchestrating public appearances in which he was impersonated by the heavily-disguised half-sister of her boyfriend. Albert was unmasked through news reports in 2006 and eventually convicted of fraud for signing contracts in Leroy's name. One might expect Jeff Feuerzeig's documentary to offer an objective account of this curious episode, but it does not, instead telling the story entirely from Albert's point of view. *Author* thus serves as an odd apologia in which Albert unrepentantly portrays her imposture not as a deliberate attempt to deceive but as a therapeutic exorcism of her own inner demons, while also characterizing those who outed her as traitors, and happily providing tapes of celebrities she duped to underscore her success (dissenting voices are conspicuously absent here). But while not even remotely balanced, the documentary does present a treasure trove of fascinating archival material (coupled with some effective animation) and is consistently engrossing even as it sidesteps the issue of culpability. One might also argue that by giving Albert free rein to justify herself, the film is more effective in eroding her credibility than a direct critical attack would have been. A strong optional purchase. (F. Swietek)

Band of Robbers ★★1/2

FilmRise, 95 min., not rated, DVD: \$19.99

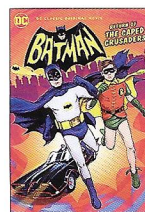
Billed as a modern-day take on the ad-

venturous pairing of Mark Twain's legendary characters Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer, *Band of Robbers* is a light comedy that imagines Twain's boy heroes as adult men who are technically on opposite sides of the law. Huck (Kyle Gallner), having taken the rap for a crime committed with Tom (Adam Nee, co-writer/director along with his brother Aaron), is released from prison on parole. Tom, now a barely-competent cop who is something of a charming hustler, picks Huck up and immediately engages him in a plan to commit robberies. Things go south quickly, but they are still drawn to their childhood goal of discovering bandit John Murrell's hidden treasure (an idea inspired by Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*). *Band of Robbers* invokes additional elements of Twain's original tales, including Becky Thatcher (a rookie cop here, played by Melissa Benoist), the lethal Injun Joe (veteran villain Stephen Lang), and even Huck's misguided "funeral." It's all presented in good fun, although the level of inspiration is not particularly high, and there isn't much sense of playful irony. A strong optional purchase. (T. Keogh)



Batman: Return of the Caped Crusaders ★★1/2

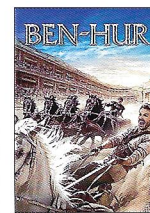
Warner, 78 min., PG, DVD: \$19.99, Blu-ray/DVD Combo: \$24.99



Adam West and Burt Ward, stars of the campy 1960s TV series *Batman*, are back as the Caped Crusader and Boy Wonder in this direct-to-video animated feature, which channels the tongue-in-cheek approach of the vintage TV show. The pair voice the dynamic duo while Julie Newmar purrs as Catwoman in this self-aware spoof that embraces the painful puns, alliterative exclamations, and deadpan delivery of the old show and features a goofy plot. After Catwoman doses Batman with a potion to turn him into a villain, the latter becomes a one-man army, taking over Gotham with the help of a buggy replica ray (holy masked Mussolini!). Meanwhile, Robin strikes an unlikely alliance with Catwoman, whose purring flirtatiousness with the Boy Wonder is the high point of this exercise in eccentricity, which works best as a knowing tribute to a cult show, playing to fans who are already in on the joke. The animation is somewhat stiff, but it does feature dozens of blank-faced Batmans engaged in a free-for-all with classic TV villains (the ultimate call-out of animated cameos). An exercise in juvenilia that is clearly aimed at nostalgic grownups, this is a strong optional purchase. (S. Axmaker)

Ben-Hur ★1/2

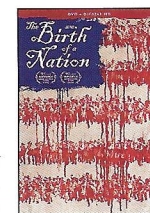
Paramount, 124 min., PG-13, DVD: \$29.99, Blu-ray/DVD Combo: \$39.99



Why on earth would someone want to remake *Ben-Hur*, the 1959 sword-and-sandals epic that set an Oscar record, winning 11 out of 12 nominations, including Best Picture, Best Director (William Wyler), and Best Actor (Charlton Heston)? Produced by Mark Burnett and Roma Downey, the husband-and-wife team behind the miniseries *The Bible*, this new version returns to the religious roots of Lew Wallace's 1880 novel *Ben-Hur: A Tale of Christ*, and is aimed directly at a faith-based audience. Set in Jerusalem, the narrative centers on wealthy Jewish nobleman Judah Ben-Hur (Jack Huston), and his adoptive Roman sibling, Messala (Toby Kebbell). When ambitious Messala betrays their family, Judah vows revenge, but in witnessing the Crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth (Brazilian actor Rodrigo Santoro), he learns compassion and forgiveness. Russian director Timur Bekmambetov deserves credit for period authenticity, effectively depicting communal life and the graphic brutality of Judah's five years as a galley slave while battling Greeks on the Ionian Sea. But there is a jarring tonality shift toward frenetic NASCAR/Formula One-like racing action when Judah learns how to become a charioteer from Nubian Sheik Ilderim (Morgan Freeman), leading to the climactic Circus Maximus chariot race. Visually impressive but dramatically bland, this is not a necessary purchase. (S. Granger)

The Birth of a Nation ★★★

Fox, 120 min., R, DVD: \$29.98, Blu-ray/DVD Combo: \$39.99, Jan. 10



Writer-director-actor Nate Parker's powerful Civil War drama centering on the 1831 slave rebellion led by Nat Turner conspicuously carries the same title as D.W. Griffith's 1915 controversial classic silent film about the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. Set on cotton plantations in Southampton County, VA, the film has the child Nat being recognized by an African tribal shaman as a potential prophet/leader, and he's encouraged to read the Bible by his master's wife (Penelope Ann Miller). Years later, Nat (Parker) becomes a Baptist preacher. Amidst rumors of insurrection, Nat is rented out by his alcoholic owner (Armie Hammer), travelling to neighboring plantations to spread a gospel of subservience and peace. But that's before traumatic acts of brutal violence—including the rape of his wife—turn Nat into a crusader who leads a ferocious uprising that claims the lives of 60 white families and results in the retaliatory slaughter of 200 blacks. Full of heavy-handed