

**Perry Mason: Season 1, Volume 1** ★★★1/2*Paramount, 5 discs, 999 min., not rated, DVD: \$54.99*

A truly groundbreaking show that combined murder mystery with courtroom drama, *Perry Mason* wasn't just a success—it was a bona fide phenomenon, exerting tremendous influence not only on viewers (who made it one of the early examples of “appointment TV”) but also on producers of other primetime series. *Perry Mason*'s format was copied repeatedly in succeeding years, as was the show's practice of stuffing each episode with easily recognizable character actors and former feature-film stars. Brilliantly cast against type, erstwhile big-screen heavy Raymond Burr played criminal defense attorney Perry Mason and made the role his own—so much so that Erle Stanley Gardner, on whose bestselling novels the series was based, subtly changed the print Mason's personality to more closely resemble that of his small-screen counterpart. Costars included Barbara Hale as secretary Della Street, William Hopper as private detective Paul Drake, William Talman as D. A. Hamilton Burger, and Ray Collins as Police Lieutenant Tragg. This boxed set collects the first 19 episodes of the 1957-58 season, which included such gems as “The Case of the Sulky Girl,” “The Case of the Vagabond Vixen,” and “The Case of the Moth-Eaten Mink”—all of them telescoped adaptations of Gardner novels. The format seldom varied: a person wrongly accused of murder retained Mason to defend him or her, an investigation was conducted, and the guilty party was uncovered during the ensuing trial (usually in a dramatic confrontation between lawyer and witness). Millions of viewers tuned in every week to see if they could outguess Mason and pick out the killer before he did. The guessing game was fun back then—and it is still. Presented in a five-disc extra-less boxed set, this first half of the debut season is highly recommended. (*E. Hulse*)

**Puppets Who Kill: The Complete Second Season** ★★★*VSC, 2 discs, 300 min., not rated, DVD: \$19.95*

Keep the kiddies far away from this one: the title's no joke. Completely vulgar, totally without any redeeming social value whatsoever, and very, very funny in a thoroughly NC-17 kind of way, this Canadian comedy series (it has never aired in the United States) is about a gang of psychopathic puppets—such as the ventriloquist dummy suspected of offing more than one of his stage partners—who get into trouble with sperm-bank nurses, prostitute nuns, jealous lesbians, etc. It's all their halfway-house social worker (played by human comedian Dan Redican) can do to avoid becoming caught up in their crimes and misdemeanors in the 13 episodes of this 2004 second season set. Like a late-night mash-up of Benny Hill and the Muppets, this is indeed sick, but it's also done well—even if no one involved can ever tell his or her mother about it. DVD extras include an interview with the puppets on Canadian morning television, commentary on select episodes with Redican and “Rocko” the puppet, and more. Recommended. (*M. Johanson*)

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**Rope** ★★★*Universal, 81 min., not rated, DVD: \$19.98***Compulsion** ★★★*Fox, 103 min., not rated, DVD: \$14.98*

The 1924 kidnapping and killing of 14-year-old Bobby Franks by a pair of young Chicago intellectuals—Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb—has inspired numerous books and films, including Alfred Hitchcock's

1948 *Rope* (based on Patrick Hamilton's play) and Richard Fleischer's 1959 *Compulsion* (based on the bestselling novel by Meyer Levin), as well as 1992's *Swoon* and 2002's *Murder by Numbers*. Hitchcock's *Rope*—his first color film—is a nearly edit-free film comprised of less than a dozen scenes (the camera routinely zooms into a character's back roughly every 10 minutes—the length of a reel at the time—to try to hide the cut) entirely set in an apartment (except for an opening establishing shot of the street outside—in which Hitchcock makes his traditional cameo). Aesthetes Brandon (John Dall) and Philip (Farley Granger) first commit a murder and then host a dinner party for—among others—the lads' Nietzsche-championing professor (James Stewart), who eventually begins to suspect that his former charges may be guilty of foul play. As screenwriter Arthur Laurents points out in the fine half-hour retrospective "making-of" featurette, Stewart was rather miscast—all three male characters in Hamilton's play homosexual, like Leopold and Loeb themselves, but the subject ("it" in Hollywood parlance) was strictly taboo in the heyday of the Hays production code. What still works well here is Hitchcock's brilliant but spare use of suspense (in one wonderful sequence, the camera follows the maid as she slowly clears off the trunk in which the body is hid—in preparation for putting away some books—while the conversations in the room continue on the soundtrack) and sterling dialogue (guest Mrs. Atwater: "When I was a girl, I used to read quite a bit." Brandon: "Oh, we all do strange things in our childhood"). In fact, the only really clunky scene in the entire film is Stewart's false-ringing morality speech at the close—aside from that, *Rope* remains a nasty little chiller. Recommended.

*Compulsion*, filmed over a decade later (ironically, in black-and-white) hews much more closely to the actual facts of the Leopold-Loeb case and features Bradford Dillman and Dean Stockwell as the intellectual murderers who "agreed to explore all the possibilities of human experience." Far more conventional in its approach, the film follows the twin storylines of the pair's steadily ratcheting uneasiness (with Stockwell in the nervous Nellie role here) after the killing and the ongoing investigation that uncovers damning evidence involving a typewriter and a pair of glasses. After the young men confess, the scene shifts to the courtroom, where Orson Welles (playing a character based on Clarence Darrow) delivers one of the longest monologues in the annals of Hollywood film, mounting an impassioned defense against capital punishment ("I'm pleading not for these two lives, but for life itself"). Presented in a pristine transfer on an extra-less disc (aside from trailers), *Compulsion* is also recommended, and together with *Rope* makes for an interesting double-bill for both individuals and film clubs. (R. Pitman)

### Animaniacs, Vol. 1 ★★★1/2

Warner, 5 discs, 550 min., not rated, DVD: \$44.98



Hello, Nurse! Still "zany to the max" after all these years, the animated anthology series *Animaniacs* at last romps onto DVD. The anarchic spirit of Termite Terrace (the building on the Warner Bros. studio lot where Bugs, Daffy, and the rest of the classic characters were born) lives on in these unashamedly loony cartoons starring the Warner brothers, Yakko (Rob Paulsen) and Wakko (Jess Harnell), and the Warner sister, Dot (Tress MacNeille)—who, according to the brilliant backstory, were created in the 1930s but considered too outrageous to be unleashed upon an unsuspecting public, and therefore locked away in the water tower of the Warner Bros. studio lot, from which they have escaped to wreak havoc. They are more kindred in spirit to Daffy Duck than Bugs Bunny, who never caused trouble unless provoked. The supporting characters are a mixed bag, but they are still far funnier than most of their current animated counterparts. Perhaps best known are the gene-spliced laboratory mice, Pinky and the Brain, who merited their own spinoff series in which they continued with their plans to take over the world. Slappy the Squirrel is amusingly